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by

William Heuman

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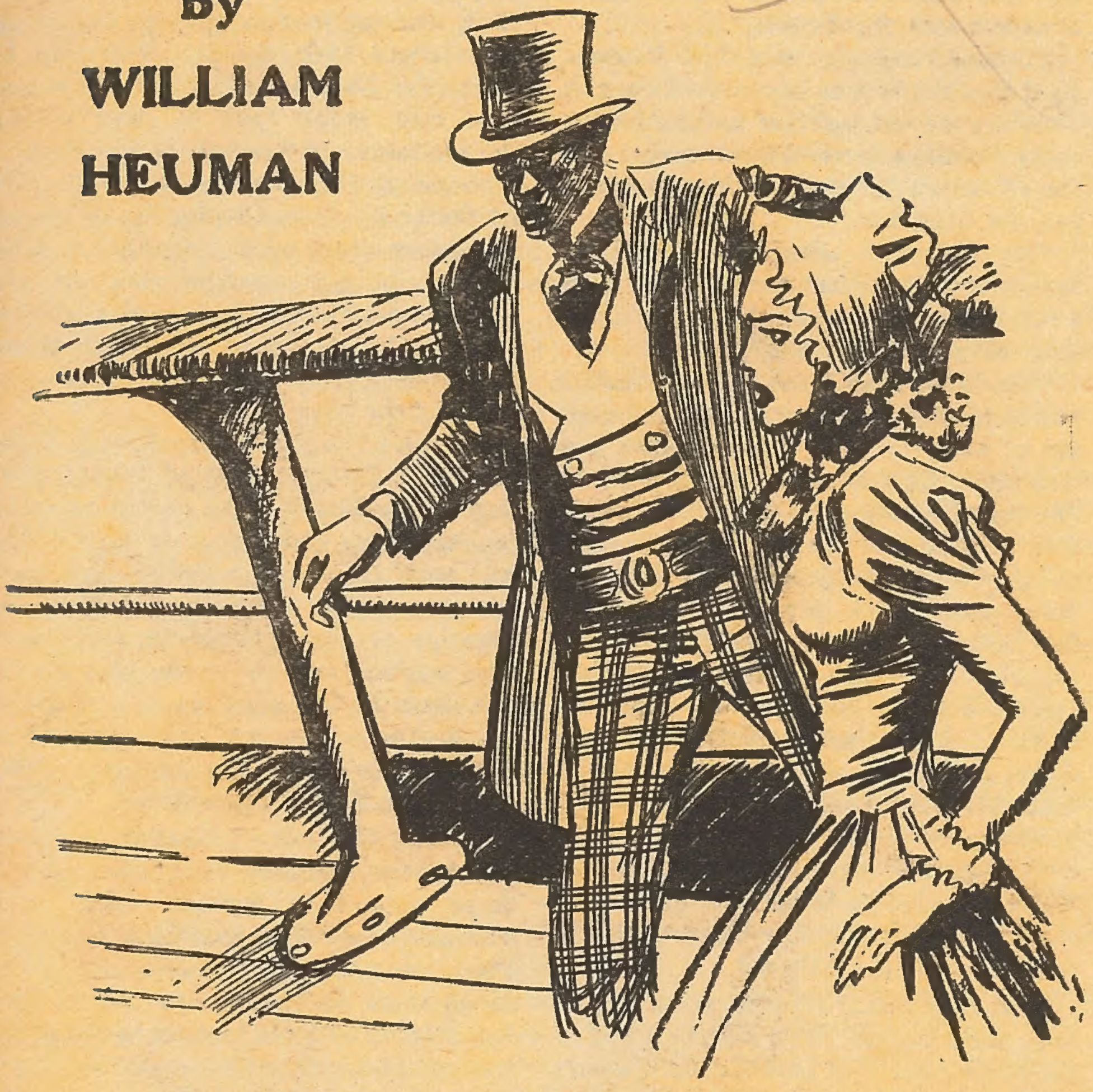
*The big Santa Fe trader smashed a fist into the robber's face, dropped him.*

CHAFFEE came down from the texas deck where he'd been looking at the moon and letting the bitterness seep through him like a slow-working poison. He went down another flight of stairs to the boiler deck of the ornate *Silver Belle*, fastest side-wheeler on the Missouri, and from here he could look down over the main deck where the poorer passengers were already curled up for the night.

Bart Chaffee lit a brown Mexican cigarette, pulled his flat-crowned hat tight over his forehead, and shoved two power-

# DESTINY

By
WILLIAM
HEUMAN



ful hands into his pockets. He was big—well over two hundred pounds, with the weight in the shoulders and the legs. He wore a black frock coat of broadcloth, with a flower-spangled vest and ruffled shirt. Back in Illinois he'd sported a high beaver hat, but he'd gotten rid of that when coming aboard ship. The flat-crowned sombrero would be more appropriate when he hit the Santa Fe trail with his dozen Chaffee "Specials."

Below on the main deck were two new Pittsburgh wagons he'd purchased in St. Louis after that disastrous visit back home. The Pittsburghs, huge affairs with red wheels and blue-painted bottoms, would make it appear as if the trip east had been partly a business affair, and it would take some of the sting out of the disappointment. In Westport he might even pretend that he'd gone east primarily to purchase new wagons, but then

there was the matter of the new house. A single man didn't purchase a house for himself.

"I am very sorry, Bart," Elsa's mother had told him. "I'm afraid she has made a poor match for herself."

Stunned, the big man had listened. He'd thought he was engaged to the girl. They'd gone out together and he'd spent many evenings in the Mason home; he'd played cars with Elsa's father, and both parents liked him.

"Mr. Edwards came here last fall," Mrs. Mason explained, "and he saw quite a lot of Elsa. I thought she had told you they were to be married."

"She hadn't told me," Bart Chaffee stated plainly. Some of the life had gone out of his gray eyes, and his heavy jaw was slack. He'd worked for two years in Westport, building up his trade till he was reputed one of the richest traders on the Trail. Each spring he sent his dozen Conestogas down the trail with five thousand pounds of trade goods for the New Mexicans in Santa Fe. He'd bought the big house on the outskirts of town as a surprise for Elsa; he was dickering for the purchase of a beautiful little gig in which Elsa could do her shopping in town.

"I suppose," Mrs. Mason explained, "Elsa intended to write you after they reached New York. Mr. Edwards has a position with the railroad."

"Railroad man," Chaffee muttered. "I hope she's happy." He'd stumbled out of the house after that because there wasn't much more to say. He hadn't received any letters from Elsa in two months, but mail was very slow on the Missouri and he hadn't thought anything of it. She'd been going with Edwards, the railroad man, all the time.

BART CHAFFEE listened now to the muffled talk from the passengers below, and the music drifting out through the open door of the *Silver Belle's* vast saloon. They were dancing inside, young couples, many of them going upriver for the ride, with the intention of returning on the down-river trip. These people below on the main deck had come to stay. They'd brought their baggage with them and it was piled up around his two Pittsburghs, cases, bales, crates by the dozen.

There were lank Missourian teamsters here, anxious to sign up with the Santa Fe traders and take the long trip to Santa Fe. There were hunters and mountain men, going back to their proper environment after a look at the East.

Standing the shadows at the far end of the boiler deck, Chaffee heard one of the saloon doors open. Turning his head slightly, he saw a couple step out, the girl in a dark cloak. He caught a glimpse of their faces, and he recognized them, having seen these two together since the start of the trip.

The girl was slender, dark-eyed, dark-haired, a different kind of beauty compared with Elsa Mason's golden hair and laughing blue eyes. The first day Chaffee had seen these two together he'd been struck by the singular watchful expression on the dark-haired girl's face. She laughed and she spoke vivaciously, but deep in her eyes, as he'd watched her in the saloon, was that attitude of vigilance as if she had another motive aside from that of friendliness.

Several times Bart Chaffee had seen her in the company of a slim, sallow-faced man with burning black eyes. There was a definite resemblance between these two, and Chaffee mentally designated them as brother and sister. He'd had a drink with the brother at the ship's bar and had caught the name, "Mr. Henderson," but he'd seen little of the young man after that.

The girl's partner was the strapping Floyd Garrison, Bart's own size, golden-haired, smooth-shaven, with a deep cleft in his massive chin. He had odd-colored, cat's-green eyes, and a booming laugh.

Floyd Garrison was tremendously popular among the men aboard ship, as well as the women. Many times Bart Chaffee watched him saunter through the card rooms, a big diamond flashing on his finger and in his gray silk cravat. Garrison lost money in some of these games, and he lost it cheerfully, always insisting

upon buying the drinks for his victors.

The big man with the golden mane had shown definite interest when he'd learned that Chaffee was a Santa Fe trader, and Bart had wondered at that.

"Possibly, Mr. Chaffee," Garrison had said, smiling, "we can do business in Westport."

"At your service," Chaffee told him. He didn't particularly need business, because his wagons were always filled with his own trade goods; but on occasions, as a favor, he took a small cargo down the Trail for a friend.

Garrison and the Henderson girl passed within three yards of Bart as he stood against the railing, but they did not see him. He heard Garrison's deep, soft laugh, and he wasn't sure whether he envied this man or not. Bart had had his own romantic disappointment, and he had the feeling that a man was hit just once like that. After that, like a horse which had been whipped badly, he shied away.

As the couple passed beneath the stairway leading to the hurricane deck, Bart saw a shadow slip out from the saloon outer wall, and then another. They disappeared around the bow of the boat, hurrying after Garrison and the girl.

QUICKLY, Bart Chaffee threw away the half-smoked cigarette, and started after them. During the past few nights there had been talk of footpads on board ship. They came up from the motley collection of passengers on the main deck, knocked down their victim with a club, stripped him of wallet and jewelry, and then fled to the lower deck again. Captain Smith of the *Silver Belle* had warned all passengers to be careful at night, and Bart Chaffee remembered those diamonds Garrison flashed openly.

He caught a glimpse of the couple a short distance ahead, walking along the guard, Garrison's head up, seeming to be laughing at the moon. The two footpads were still slinking along the saloon wall, getting up closer to their victim.

Chaffee went after them silently, coming up just as the man in the lead was getting ready to spring on Garrison's back. He had his right hand raised when Chaffee grasped him by the back of the collar, yanking him around.

The big Santa Fe trader smashed a fist into this man's face and then let him drop. The second robber had let out a short cry of warning, and was turning to run when Chaffee caught him by the arm, powerful fingers tightening like steel bands.

From that pain alone the footpad howled in agony, and then Bart Chaffee pushed him up against the saloon wall, pinned him there with his left hand and struck twice with his right. The footpad went limp in his grasp, and Chaffee let him fall.

Floyd Garrison approached, something gleaming in his right hand. Bart couldn't see the big man's face in the shadows.

"All right," Bart said simply. "It's all over."

"Footpads?" Garrison asked, recognizing his voice.

Bart Chaffee nodded. "You should hide those sparklers," he observed. "They provide a temptation."

Garrison laughed softly. One of the two men Chaffee had struck down was beginning to move and groan. Chaffee struck a match and looked down at him. The man's nose was broken and his face bloody.

Quickly, Chaffee blew out the match as he heard Miss Henderson's light step.

"I'll look up the steward," Chaffee said. He yanked one man to his feet, shaking him as a dog shakes a terrier.

"I got enough, Jack!" the footpad screamed in terror.

Floyd Garrison was laughing in his chest. "I'd hate to meet you with bare knuckles, Chaffee." He grinned. "The man's frightened out of his wits." He turned to the girl. "Mr. Chaffee saved us from the horrible experience of being robbed," he said. "You have met Mr. Chaffee?" The laughter was still in his voice. Floyd Garrison was in no way fazed by the fact that he'd come close to having his skull cracked. Chaffee had seen a heavy metal wagon pin fall to the

deck when he'd struck that first man.

"I have not had the honor," Miss Henderson said softly. There was the accent of the south in her tones.

"Miss Julia Henderson," Garrison introduced them. "Mr. Chaffee of Westport, and Santa Fe."

"A trader?" Miss Henderson asked quickly.

"At your service, ma'am," Bart Chaffee murmured.

"My brother and I contemplate taking the trip to Santa Fe," Miss Henderson said. "Perhaps we could accompany your wagons, Mr. Chaffee."

"A pleasure," Bart said quietly, and he wondered whether it really would be a pleasure. "The caravan will be leaving Westport in a week or so. You may consider yourself part of our outfit."

"My brother Jud will talk with you concerning payment," Miss Henderson said.

Again Bart nodded, and he glanced at Floyd Garrison who had gone over to drag the second footpad to his feet. Garrison did not seem interested in the conversation.

THEY MARCHED the captive thieves to the steward's office, where several of the crew took them in charge.

Walking back toward the saloon, Floyd Garrison said suddenly:

"I have a cargo aboard ship I should like delivered in Santa Fe, Chaffee."

Bart Chaffee smiled a little in the darkness. Garrison had come to his decision very suddenly after hearing that Miss Henderson wanted to go out with the first caravan.

"Stop in my office," Bart said, "I'll have to consult our wagonmaster before taking on any cargos."

"Of course," Garrison nodded. "Did I thank you for saving my wallet?"

"Not necessary," Bart said. There were certain little things about Garrison that he did not like; these were scarcely discernible, but present nevertheless. The light-haired man had an air of confidence about him which was not obnoxious in itself, but he had the habit of unconsciously imposing upon other men under the guise of good-fellowship. Several times Bart got the impression that there was another man beneath the cheerful, smiling Floyd Garrison. Whether that man was dangerous or weak would be revealed when Garrison was forced to drop his mask.

"I consider myself in your debt." Garrison chuckled. "We shall drink on it."

Bart went back with him to the bar and saw Jud Henderson there. The thin, pale-faced man was at the far end of the bar, and Bart saw him studying them carefully over his glass as he pretended to chat with another passenger.

Downing his drink, Chaffee told himself the Henderson two—brother and sister—were playing a game and Floyd Garrison was an integral part of that game. Considering the matter now, he realized how cleverly Julia Henderson had secured passage for herself and brother down the Trail. Very possibly she knew Garrison was heading for Santa Fe also with his cargo, and that he would try to go along with the same outfit.

The nature of the game, and the stakes involved, Chaffee could only guess at, but he was positive the Hendersons were not after the big man's money. If they'd wanted to rob Garrison they could have taken him aboard ship any time; and the *Silver Belle* docked at Westport on the morrow.

"To the success of our trip." Floyd Garrison smiled, greenish eyes narrowed, a set of beautiful white teeth revealed. For a moment Bart Chaffee considered the possibility that Julia Henderson had fallen for this man who'd evidently had much success with women in the past, and that her brother, knowing this, was keeping a watchful eye on the two. He discarded the theory a moment later, remembering the calm, confidence in the eyes of the girl. She was not one who fell for masculine looks. That sort of thing was for Elsa Mason!

*"A nice tune," Chaffee said. Then he snatched the violin and smashed it over a chair.*

## CHAPTER II

### *Battle Brewed*

THE *Silver Belle* slid up to the wharf at ten o'clock the next morning, and Bart Chaffee spotted his wagon-master, Zack Hogan, a squat red-headed man with very broad shoulders.

Hogan was wearing a clean shirt today and his boots were polished. He waved as Chaffee stood on the hurricane deck, smoking one of the Mexican cigarettes he'd brought back from Santa Fe the previous season.

The wagon-master's blue eyes moved back and forth hastily in the vicinity where Chaffee was standing, and the trader frowned a little. Hogan was looking for the new wife—the girl who was to occupy that house on the outskirts of town.

Failing to see her, Hogan's mouth fell and he stared at Chaffee queerly. Hogan was waiting as the passengers went across the gangplank, and Chaffee was wondering how to explain it to the man, when Julia Henderson stepped up beside him. She'd been walking directly behind him with her brother, but Bart had not been aware of it.

"We shall stop in to see you tomorrow." Miss Henderson smiled. "Jud thinks it would be practical if you would give

us a list of things we will need on the trail."

"Of course," Bart agreed. "Ask for Chaffee's."

He was not prepared for what happened next. Zack Hogan bore down on the two of them, scattering passengers right and left. The redhead grabbed Chaffee with his left arm, and threw his right around Julia Henderson's waist.

"First man in Westport to kiss the bride!" the Irishman roared gleefully. Then he planted a resounding kiss on Miss Henderson's cheek.

The girl stared in surprise, and then she smiled a little, looking up at Chaffee.

Bart moistened his lips, feeling his face going a dull red. The passengers behind them were watching and smiling. There was a crowd of men from Westport, traders, teamsters, roustabouts, listening in. This wasn't the way Chaffee had planned on breaking the news.

"An apology is in order, Hogan," he said quietly. "The young lady is not my wife."

"Not your wife?" Hogan gasped. He went pink to the ears, and he swallowed several times before speaking. "I . . . I'm sorry, lady," he spluttered. "Chaffee was supposed to bring back his wife on this trip. I reckon somethin' went wrong."

Julia Henderson glanced at Bart and the big man read the sympathy in her eyes. He slapped Hogan's back and started him across the gangplank again.

Hogan threw a few curses out the side of his mouth as he pushed through the laughing roustabouts on the wharf. The redhead had steely blue eyes, a flattened nose, slightly upturned, and two gold teeth in the front of his mouth. When he grinned, the sun reflected on them.

"What in hell happened, Chaffee?" the wagon-master whispered when they were walking swiftly down the street toward the chaffee yards.

"How's business?" Chaffee asked grimly.

Hogan looked at him intently and shook his head. "Damn it, when a man buys a house—"

"How's business, Hogan?" Chaffee snapped.

"All right." The redhead scowled. "We hit the Trail in four days—nearly a hundred wagons takin' the trip. Buckmaster has twelve Conestogas in the caravan." Hogan stopped suddenly. "That big baboon will have plenty to say about this, Chaffee."

Bart Chaffee nodded. Buckmaster and himself were reputed to be the two biggest traders in Westport. Each year they put more wagons into the caravan and hauled bigger loads than any of the other merchants in the town. The giant, George Buckmaster, had from the start resented the competition Chaffee was giving him. Buckmaster had been in Westport from the beginning, and he'd built up his trade.

"Stay out o' the Comanche Saloon," Hogan warned. "That's where big George will be tonight."

"Our wagons loaded?" Chaffee asked.

"We're ready to roll," Hogan said, "soon as we fill up the other two Pittsburghs you bought." He started to light a pipe when they got inside the office.

CHAFFEE walked to the window and stared out over the yard. There were an even dozen Conestogas lined up along the fence—trim, sturdy wagons with rakish lines, wheels red and bodies green. Huge Osnaburg sheets were tied down over the cargos to keep out the rain on the long trip south.

Cattle lowed in the big pen over at the north end of the yard, and there was the sound of a hammer on anvil in the blacksmith shop. A half dozen teamsters were greasing axles with a mixture of tar, resin and tallow. The water barrels were in place on each wagon.

Without turning around, Chaffee said suddenly: "She married a railroad man before I got there."

Zack Hogan took a deep breath and then slammed one big fist down on Chaffee's battered oak desk.

"Damn anything that runs on tracks." Hogan scowled. He said then, "What about the house?"

"Go down and tell Jeb Hathaway to sell it," Chaffee said without emotion. He knew that by nightfall every man in Westport would know that he'd been jilted. It was a thing which struck at his pride. He stood by the window, very tight, a brown cigarette in his mouth, hands in his pockets, fingernails digging into palms.

Zack stared at his back, a little embarrassed by the moment of silence which followed.

"You'll forget it, Chaffee," he muttered, "when the wagons are rollin'."

"Tell Buckmaster to stay out of my way," Chaffee said, without looking around.

The Irishman laughed shortly. "He'll do that, too," he growled. "You're wavin' a red flag in front o' that bull's face, Chaffee."

Bart Chaffee nodded. Sooner or later, he realized, he would have to fight Buckmaster. The whole town had been waiting for over a year—anticipating the battle, making wagers on it. Chaffee knew that the thing would come to a head tonight because Buckmaster would never let this opportunity go by to prod him.

Shaking his head, Zack Hogan went out the door, and Chaffee sank down in his chair by the desk. From a pigeon hole in the desk he took out several of Elsa's letters, crunched them in his fingers, and dropped them into a wooden box which served as a waste basket. On second thought he picked up the letters again and put a match to them, remembering that there were many manifestations of deep love in those earlier letters—and if they should fall into George Buckmaster's hands, Chaffee would be literally laughed out of town.

AN HOUR LATER Chaffee was eating at the Benson House, a block from his yards. From his window he'd caught a glimpse of Julia Henderson and her brother stepping into one of Westport's stores to do some preliminary shopping. Floyd Garrison was standing on a corner talking with Lem Andrews, a horse trader.

*The big Mexican was swarthy-skinned; he had a cruel mouth, and a saber cut on a side of his face.*

During the afternoon Chaffee made a tour of his yard and then purchased two teams of oxen from Ben Hackett, a trader who was going out of business. He was looking over the big animals when Zack Hogan came into the yard.

"Lot o' talk goin' around, Chaffee." The redhead scowled. "I come near to punchin' George Buckmaster's face."

"Stay away from him," Bart ordered. Hogan was five feet, four inches tall, and Buckmaster was at least six-feet-five and weighed two hundred and forty pounds. "Where is George now?" Chaffee wanted to know.

"At the Comanche Saloon," Hogan said. "He's fixin' somethin' up for you, Chaffee."

Bart stepped away from the oxen, examining them critically. The teamsters, who had been close by, were watching him, grinning a little. The blacksmith, Ed Lee, stood in the door of his shop,

hammer in hand, watching Chaffee's face intently.

Bart Chaffee smiled a little. These were his men and they respected him; they were wondering now whether he would sit down and take Buckmaster's nonsense, or have it out with the giant. Chaffee realized if he backed down he was through with his crew. They would work for him because he paid the best wages in Westport, but it would not be the same.

"How about a drink, Zack?" Chaffee said mildly. He saw the grin spread over Ed Lee's wide face, and then the blacksmith put his hammer down on a nearby barrel top and slipped out of his apron.

"Hell," Zack Hogan muttered. He looked at Bart Chaffee queerly. "That man's as strong as a bull, Chaffee. He can knock down a mule with a blow."

"Since when," Chaffee asked, grinning, "did you turn down a drink, Zack?"

"All right," the wagon-master snapped, "if it gets too bad, Chaffee, I'm bendin' my gun barrel over Buckmaster's square head."

Chaffee shook his head. "You'll stay out of it, Zack," he said slowly.

A man yelled from the other end of the yard, and then the Chaffee crew gathered slowly, moving toward the corral. There were thirty men here, teamsters, drovers, yard men, and the two clerks in Chaffee's office.

Bart Chaffee studied them for a moment and then said to Zack Hogan:

"We'll have that drink."

They went out of the main yard into the street, Chaffee's crew following, leaving the big yard completely deserted. Walking down Chauncey Street, men stopped to stare at them and then scoot for the Comanche Saloon on the next block.

JULIA HENDERSON and her brother stepped out of the Palace Hotel, and were standing at the edge of the walk as Chaffee strode down the center of the street, thirty men behind him, and dozens of others falling into line. Big Bart Chaffee tipped his hat to the girl. He could hear noises behind him as his own crew flashed hard money and others in the mob snatched at the bets.

Chaffee saw the girl whisper something to her brother, and the thin-faced Jud answered. He saw her face grow a little pale. Chaffee didn't break his stride as he moved past the hotel, hands in his pockets, a brown cigarette in his mouth.

At the next intersection Floyd Garrison stepped out of Martin Simms' General Store, eyes widening at the crowd moving past him. Bart Chaffee saw him speak to a man nearby, and when he got his answer, Garrison grinned. He started down the walk toward the Comanche Saloon.

Chaffee saw the storekeepers all along the main street locking up their places and running toward the Comanche. Many of them carried a handful of bills with them, because Westport was a betting town.

"If Buckmaster whips you," Zack Hogan mumbled, "our boys will be broke till the Fall."

"Then we'll carry them anyway," Chaffee smiled. "Don't worry about it, Zack."

The Comanche was a one-story building occupying an entire corner of Chauncey and Maple Streets. There was a crowd in front of the saloon, and another mob inside, looking over the batwing doors, and out the windows.

"Here he comes!" a man shouted, and Chaffee heard the laughter of George Buckmaster inside. It was deep, rich, musical.

Pushing through the door, Chaffee spotted Buckmaster at one end of the bar, towering head and shoulders over the nearest men, a veritable giant with wide, pugnacious face, nose broken at the bridge, a pair of merry blue eyes.

In a rough-and-tumble fight in a cabin outside Westport, Buckmaster was reputed to have downed five lobos who'd tried to rob him. He'd broken the neck of one man and disabled the others.

Bart Chaffee shouldered his way through the mob at the bar, Zack Hogan at his elbow. The trader signaled for a

bottle and poured two drinks. A hush had fallen over the mob inside, but the crowd out in the street were still shouting. Chaffee heard some of the taunts.

"Buckmaster—fifty dollars!" one man yelled.

"I'll take that, friend," a familiar voice called from the door. There was laughter in the voice. It was Floyd Garrison.

Bart Chaffee leaned one elbow on the bar and lifted his glass to Zack Hogan. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Buckmaster flash a signal to the three musicians seated on a little platform in the corner. A violin, guitar and accordion comprised the orchestra.

## CHAPTER III

### *Grim Guns*

THE THREE MUSICIANS started to play *"Here Comes the Bride!"* They played very softly, and the hundred men in the room watched Bart Chaffee's face intently. Several tittered nervously, but George Buckmaster laughed out aloud, enjoying his little joke.

Chaffee set down his glass and strolled over toward the musicians. The violinist stopped very suddenly, and then flashed an appealing look in the direction of Buckmaster.

"A nice tune," Chaffee said softly. Then he snatched the violin from the man's limp fingers and smashed it over the back of the nearest chair. "How much was it worth?" he asked.

The violinist, a small, blond-haired man, gulped, "Seventy-five dollars."

Chaffee nodded. He walked back to the bar and stood in front of George Buckmaster, his thumbs in his vest pockets.

"Reckon you owe the man seventy-five, George," he said softly.

Buckmaster howled with laughter. "Dig for it, Chaffee!" he yelled.

Bart Chaffee drew back his right arm and smashed it into the giant's stomach, making him gasp. Buckmaster roared like a wounded lion, unbuckled his gunbelt, and tossed it aside.

Chaffee slipped out of his black frock coat, handing it to Zack Hogan. Bart was the smaller man, although six feet tall himself. They were the same age, but Chaffee was much the faster man on his feet. As Buckmaster charged him, Bart stepped aside and rammed a heavy fist once more into the giant's stomach. On the way down to the saloon he'd decided upon his strategy. Buckmaster had a bull neck set upon those tremendous shoulders, and a man could hammer at his face all afternoon without hurting him too much, but the giant bulged a little around the waist.

"Chaffee—Chaffee!" the crew howled from the doorway.

"Take it outside, gentlemen!" Sam Howlett, the bartender, shrieked, realizing the damage these two big men could do in his shop.

Bart Chaffee backed swiftly toward the door as Buckmaster charged him again, swinging ponderous arms. One blow from Buckmaster's fist was enough to knock down an ox.

Nimbly, Chaffee backed out through the batwing doors, stepping into the street with Buckmaster after him. The giant missed a tremendous swing with his right hand and stumbled past. Chaffee hit him in the ribs with his left, and then smashed both fists into the stomach again. He saw Buckmaster's mouth open, but the giant was still grinning.

Floyd Garrison stood on the walk, smoking a cigar, enjoying the match. Jud and Julia Henderson were standing on the next corner, looking down the street. There were at least two hundred people gathered outside the Comanche Saloon as the two fighters stumbled outside. Many of them were still making their bets despite the fact that Buckmaster had yet to land a blow.

"Get him!" Zack Hogan yelped. "Break his belly, Chaffee!"

Bart Chaffee backed away, always circling his man, waiting for the next charge.

"Damn it," Buckmaster grumbled once. "Stand still."

Bart leaped in then with his left hand and struck the giant across the face with it, drawing blood from his lips. He saw Buckmaster's right hand coming up toward his jaw and he tried to back away before it could land. The crowd had been surging in close to see better, those in the rear pushing. Bart fell back against one of the spectators, and Buckmaster's fist crashed against the left side of his face.

He went down heavily, that portion of his face numbed from the blow. He rolled to his right as he went down, knowing Buckmaster's next move. The giant had made a long leap for him, intending to crash his two hundred and forty pounds on top of the smaller man.

Buckmaster landed in the dirt with a terrific grunt, missing Chaffee completely. He got to his feet, shaking his left hand, which seemed to have been sprained, but still smiling.

BART CHAFFEE grinned also. He'd never had any ill-feeling toward Buckmaster in the past. The big man was a clean fighter, and a man with much pride. There had always been talk that Chaffee could whip him, and Buckmaster had had to see for himself.

Buckmaster charged in again, punching with both hands, hoping to pin his man back against the crowd. Chaffee hit him hard in the stomach with his right hand and skipped away. He went under Buckmaster's arm on another occasion and brought up his fist to the giant's chin, feeling the force of the blow to his heels. Buckmaster only shook his head and grinned the more.

Zack Hogan wasn't yelling any more, and the Chaffee men were watching quietly. Buckmaster had a reputation of getting stronger as a fight progressed. His tremendous weight and charging tactics usually wore down the other men, enabling him to get close enough to clamp those powerful arms around his opponent's waist, squeezing the breath from him.

"Fifty more on Chaffee," Floyd Garrison said suddenly. There was a swarm of men anxious to take the offer.

Bart Chaffee kept out in the center of the street, circling his man, trying to reserve his strength. He'd seen Buckmaster fight too many times in Westport not to know the man's game. The giant trader never wearied, but he could be made sick from those lammerlike blows to the body.

Again and again Chaffee went down low, and stepped in, bringing his own two hundred and five pounds behind the blows to Buckmaster's stomach. Once he felt the big man give after a right crashed home, but Buckmaster still smiled, and this air of confidence made the Chaffee men glum.

"You can't chop that oak down, Chaffee," a Buckmaster teamster howled gleefully. "Another hundred on big George!" There were no takers.

Buckmaster managed to get in a few blows now, one of them catching Chaffee on the side of the mouth and drawing blood. Chaffee seemed to be getting slower, and Buckmaster hit him more often, once knocking him to his knees.

Chaffee got up and retreated again with Buckmaster after him. He had the giant coming in faster all the time, literally hurling himself at the smaller man. Bart backed toward the boardwalk, bracing one heel against it. He saw the confidence in Buckmaster's eyes as the big man came in, and then he let his right hand fly for the stomach.

With his one leg braced against the walk, and Buckmaster charging in, Chaffee got terrific power into the punch. It was something he'd been saving for the past five minutes when Buckmaster thought he'd had the fight all his own way.

The fist landed in the pit of the stomach, an inch above Buckmaster's belt. Chaffee heard the breath leave the giant's body, and then he smashed his left to the same place, feeling it sink deep into the fleshy part of Buckmaster's stomach.

The giant, with mouth open gasping for air, started to go down, but Chaffee

*Chaffee slid a heavy .44 Dragoon Colt from his holster and held it in readiness.*

hit him three times on the jaw in rapid succession, making him fall backward instead of forward. The last punch carried every ounce of Chaffee's weight, and he knew it was enough.

George Buckmaster fell flat on his back and lay without moving a muscle. The end had come so unexpectedly that the spectators were stunned for a brief moment, and then Chaffee's crew started to whoop it up, swarming around the trader.

Bleeding around the mouth and nose, Chaffee slipped into his coat and started down the street, a little sick to the stomach now that it was all over. The left side of his face was still numb from that punch Buckmaster had landed earlier in the fight. He'd taken a few punches in the body also, and his ribs were sore.

"You meat him," Zack Hogan was saying dumbly. "You beat him fair an' square, Chaffee!"

BART walked past the Hendersons, holding a handkerchief to his bloody lips. With his free hand he touched his hat again. Julia Henderson was staring at him curiously. A mob followed him back to the Chaffee yards, and in front of the Comanche Saloon three of George Buckmaster's teamsters were hoisting the giant to his feet.

"You even had me fooled," Hogan chuckled. "Buckmaster must o' thought a

ton o' brick fell on him."

Hogan got out a basin of water back in the office and went to work on Chaffee's face. The lower lip was badly cut, but the other bruises were superficial.

Chaffee sat on a stool facing the door as Hogan bathed the wounds. Out in the yard he could see his teamsters still yelling in good humor.

There was a shadow in the doorway, and then Floyd Garrison came in. He sat down on a corner of the desk, a little grin grin on his face.

"You're a hard man with your fists, Chaffee." He chuckled.

Bart didn't say anything. He remembered that on the boat Garrison had mentioned a possible cargo for his wagons.

"Ain't a man from Westport to Santa Fee will stand up against Chaffee now," Zack Hogan boasted. "Buckmaster had had 'em all scared to death."

Garrison lit a cigarette and dangled one boot easily. He studied the battered fighter ere before him, as smoke curled up toward the ceiling. Then he said carefully:

"Did you ask your wagon-master whether you have room for a cargo, Chaffee?"

"You ask him," Bart said. "Zack Hogan —Mr. Garrison."

"Howdee," the redhead murmured. "We're kind o' filled up, Chaffee, except for those two new wagons."

"How much of a load do you have?" Bart asked without looking at him.

Garrison got up and walked toward the door, closed it, and came back. Zack Hogan's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything.

"Can we talk alone?" Garrison asked.

"Hogan's my wagon-master," Chaffee said quietly. "How much space do you want?"

Floyd Garrison looked at his cigarette. "I'm hiring all your wagons, Chaffee," he said.

Hogan gulped, and then turned around, mouth open.

"Most of my wagons are loaded," Chaffee explained. "What will I do with all my trade goods?"

"You have a warehouse," Garrison said. "Send it on the next trip. I'm paying good money for this."

"How much?" Chaffee asked curiously.

"Ten thousand dollars," Garrison told him calmly, "to deliver my goods to Santa Fe." He paused. "I'll pay you five now and five more when re reach the Plaza in Santa Fe."

"You bring all that stuff on the *Silver Belle?*" Chaffee asked.

"Some," Garrison said. "The rest will be in on the *Henry Blades*, docking tomorrow afternoon."

"What's the cargo?" Chaffee wanted to know.

Floyd Garrison pursed his lips. He was still smiling blandly. "Guns," he said.

"A dozen wagonloads!" Zack Hogan gasped. "What in hell—?"

Bart Chaffee silenced the wagon-master with a look. "I'll have to know what they're for," he said, "before I take on a cargc like that."

"Your privilege," Floyd Garrison agreed. "I'm delivering those guns to a Señor Juan Silverado in Santa Fe. They are to be used to arm the citizens of New Mexico in a relebbion against Mexico City and the regime of President Suarez."

BART CHAFFEE stood up, mopping his face with a towel. There was no emotion in his gray eyes. Four years ago the Texans, with Sam Houston in command, had soundly whipped the Mexican army under General Santa Ana, achieving their independence. They'd been applying for admission to the Union ever since. New Mexico, the northernmost of old Mexico's provinces, was in as miserable a condition as Texas had been before the revolt. Crooked politicians had control of the local government and were milking the harmless peons and *mestizos*.

Chaffee hung the towel on the rack before giving his reply. He shook his head.

"Why not?" Floyd Garrison asked quickly.

"No contraband," Chaffee said.

Even Zack Hogan stared at him. The rifles were for a good cause and he knew it. The home government of Mexico was as corrupt as the core of a rotten apple.

To throw the politicians out of office in Santa Fe would have been a blessing for the people.

"You forgettin' that bribe we got to pay to the governor every time we bring a wagon into Santa Fe?" Hogan asked softly.

"No," Chaffee said. "I remember it." He looked at Garrison calmly.

The big man bowed politely. "I trust you will regard our talk in the strictest confidence," he said.

"Of course," Chaffee agreed. He didn't like the expression in Garrison's eyes. For one moment he saw there the other personality behind this smooth, smiling front, and he knew that Floyd Garrison could be very dangerous; and he was engaged in a big business. His profit on the guns must be immense if he could pay ten thousand to transport them over the Trail.

"He'll get somebody else," Zack Hogan said when Garrison went out. "That's too much money to be around loose."

Bart Chaffee nodded. He was thinking then of that epic retreat Sam Houston had made after the early disasters in the war for Texas independence. Bart had been with the American volunteers as the battered force of Texans stumbled through the rain and mud, weary and discouraged. At San Jacinto he'd seen that first charge into the Mexican encampment, and he'd been one of the first over the low rampart.

"I don't like the idea of a strong armed force hanging over the head of Texas," Chaffee said slowly, "and with the Mexican government still having visions of reconquering their former territory."

"Reckon some day them congressmen in Washington are goin' to let Houston's boys into the Union," Hogan growled. "Then the trouble will be all over."

"Until that day," Chaffee said, "I'd rather see Texas an independent republic." He remembered the blood that had been shed—at the Alamo, at Goliath, good American blood—that of Crockett, and Travis and Bowie . . .

Julia and Jud Henderson came in an hour later, the girl studying Chaffee's puffed face.

"I suppose you *had* to fight him," she said.

"I thought so," Chaffee told her. "Buckmaster is a good man at heart, but he has to have his fun."

"We thought we'd make arrangements for the trip to Santa Fe," Jud explained. "There is the matter of supplies we shall need."

"You may purchase whatever you think necessary," Chaffee told him, "and draw on me if you run short."

Jud Henderson nodded his thanks. He had something else on his mind, and Chaffee saw that he did not know how to introduce the matter.

"I understand," the slim man said suddenly, "that Mr. Garrison will be with our party."

"No," Chaffee said, and he saw the quick disappointment come into Jud Henderson's brown eyes. "I'm sure that Garrison will be with the caravan leaving the latter part of this week. My wagons were filled up."

Jud Henderson smiled, much relieved. "Mr. Garrison made our acquaintance on the boat," he explained. "We thought it would be pleasant to continue the association to Santa Fe."

Bart Chaffee nodded. He saw Zack Hogan studying the dark-haired man curiously, and when they left, the redhead muttered:

"Those two don't seem like the kind who would fall in with Garrison."

Chaffee shrugged. "We shall see," he said.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Mexican Menace*

THE DAY BEFORE the caravan pulled out of Westport, Zack Hogan broke into the office, the excitement showing in his eyes.

"Buckmaster's unloadin' his wagons," he mumbled, "an' runnin' them down to the wharf for a new cargo."

Chaffee rubbed his jaw. "Then George is carrying guns to Santa Fe."

"I don't like that Garrison galoot on this trip." Hogan scowled. "He's bringin' trouble with him."

"We'll watch him," Chaffee said.

Seventy-five wagons rolled out of Westport at dawn the next day, Buckmaster's dozen Conestogas up ahead of Chaffee's fourteen. Chaffee, riding a big buckskin animal, saw the wheels of Buckmaster's wagons sinking deep into the soft sand of the trail.

Jud Henderson, riding beside him on a small sorrel horse, seemed to notice this fact also, but he made no comment. The girl sat up on Chaffee's lead wagon, chatting with Floyd Garrison, who rode beside the vehicle.

The caravan was divided into three columns, with Chaffee's wagons on the outside lane. The big teamsters in homespuns, checked woolen shirts, and tattered broad-rimmed felt hats, strode beside the wagons, cracking whips and calling to each other cheerfully.

Once or twice Chaffee had run across George Buckmaster, and the big man nodded to him quietly. His pride had been badly hurt in the fight, but Chaffee was sure the giant bore him no ill will. He was never the man to harbor a grudge.

At Council Grove a man by the name of Graves was elected wagon-boss with Bart Chaffee designated as commander of the guard. Crewmen went into the hardwood forests around Council Grove to cut extra wagon tongues and axles for the long trip ahead.

On the other side of Council Grove there was always the possibility of Indian attacks, and the wagons were drawn up in a rough quadrangle each evening with the most valuable animals inside the corral and the others out on the plains guarded by the drovers.

"There would be hell to pay from the Mexican government," Zack Hogan said once as he watched Buckmaster's wagons rolling into line, "if they knew what big George was carrying."

"Garrison is keeping it under cover," Chaffee observed. "I doubt if Buckmaster's teamsters know what's in the crates."

"Every time I look at them damn' wagons," Hogan muttered, "I get the feelin' somethin's goin' to exploded sooner or later."

Bart Chaffee stared at the twelve Conestogas up ahead of his own vehicles. Buckmaster's wagons bore a remarkable resemblance to his own. They were mostly four or five years old and they'd been on the trail many times, showing the signs of wear. Each vehicle was heavily loaded, and the load covered with Osnaburg sheets. Buckmaster used big mules on his wagons while Chaffee relied on the slower, more stable oxen.

IT WAS two hundred and seventy miles to the Arkansas River, and they camped on the bank of the shallow river just below Chouteau's Island, the usual crossing place.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the wagons were drawn up in the quadrangle and the animals set out to graze. Zack Hogan came up as Chaffee was watering his horse in the river.

"Some o' the boys spotted buffalo two miles up the river," the wagon-master said. "There's a party goin' after 'em."

Chaffee nodded. "Saddle a horse," he ordered. "We can use some fresh meat." He saw Buckmaster calling to his drovers. A half dozen other men were racing down toward the river and plunging into the shallow water. Chaffee and Hogan followed them across the river. There were a number of easterners in the party and they made a great deal of noise, calling to each other.

"Hell," Hogan said in disgust. "These dudes will frighten them buffalo clear up to the Canadian border."

"We'll cut south," Chaffee said. "We might be able to pick up the herd when they start to run." They could see the dark spots on the horizon far upriver, with half a hundred riders spurring toward them.

Making a wide circuit, they could hear the shots later, and then Chaffee spotted a half dozen buffalo ahead in a wallow. The big animals lumbered out of the hole and headed still farther south, both

men after them. Chaffee rode up beside a young cow, aimed at the spot just below the shoulder and pulled the trigger of his heavy Sharps gun.

The cow stumbled and then went down, Chaffee taking off after a big bull. He brought this animal down with two shots and then signaled for Hogan to pull up. The Irishman had also shot a fat cow.

"Ride in and bring back a few pack animals," Chaffee said. As he swung out of the saddle he spotted the deep hoofprints of many horses, the trail starting a few yards beyond the bull he'd shot. Hogan saw the sign at the same time.

"Lot o' riders," he muttered, "an' shod horses!"

Bart Chaffee examined the trail critically. It was about twenty yards wide, and he surmised that a large party of horsemen had ridden past this spot some time during the day. The tracks were fresh.

"They ain't Dragoons," Hogan stated. "We're on the other side o' Arkansas, Chaffee. We're in Mexican territory."

"It's a long way to Santa Fe," Chaffee observed thoughtfully. "What is this party doing along the Arkansas?" The riders weren't Indians because the horses were shod. "How many you figure, Zack?" he asked.

Hogan studied the tracks carefully. "I'd say over a hundred riders." He walked over and picked up a tiny silver object glittering in the late afternoon sun. Handing this to Chaffee, he said quietly, "Reckon they're Mexicans o' some kind."

Chaffee nodded. He stared at the little silver button in his hand. It was the kind Mexican riders love to decorate their horses with.

"Mexicans," Chaffee said, "or New Mexicans, and what are they after?"

"We could take a look at their camp," Hogan said. "Can't be far from here."

BART CHAFFEE climbed into the saddle again. The trail led due south, paralleling the Santa Fe Trail, but about four miles north of it.

"Seems to me," Hogan grumbled as they rode along, "that these hombres are

*Garrison rode his horse up to within twenty yards of Chaffee's wagon and then stopped. "Chaffee!" he called sharply.*

stayin' away from the trail. Maybe they got a reason for not wantin' to meet us, Chaffee."

"Think of any?" Chaffee asked.

"Not yet," Hogan admitted.

It was getting more and more difficult to see as the sun went down, and several times Chaffee had to dismount to strike a match. An hour after sundown he spotted the lights twinkling on the horizon as they topped a slope.

"Campfires," Hogan said. "That's them."

They approached slowly, walking the horses till they came to within several hundred yards of the fires. There were six of them, indicating the size of the party.

Staking the horses on the open plain, they went forward on foot, circling to

the left where the ground seemed to rise. Chaffee could make out the figures of men moving in front of the fires. He caught a glimpse of silver buckles flashing in the firelight.

"Any closer?" Hogan whispered as they crawled forward on their stomachs to within forty yards of the nearest fire.

"Stay here," Chaffee said softly. A man was standing with his back to him, a Mexican, but in the dress of the military. The man was heavily built, and rather tall for a Mexican. He had on a pair of cruel Spanish spurs, capable of cutting open the flanks of a good horse. It was the man's height which attracted Chaffee's attention. He was nearly six feet tall, solid in the shoulders. As he turned around to speak with a raggedly dressed peon nearby, Chaffee caught a glimpse of his face.

The big Mexican was swarthy-skinned with a cruel, large mouth, and a saber cut running from the left ear to the left corner of his month. This cut pulled his mouth up on one side in a perpetual grin.

Bart Chaffee stiffened on the ground. The Mexican's body had been familiar, and that saber cut definitely identified him. He'd been a captain in Santa Ana's army destroyed at San Jacinto. Chaffee had seen him in the prisoner's camp, sitting on the ground, dazed at the awful drive of the Texan army. He'd been wounded in the right leg.

"That could be part o' the New Mexican army," Hogan whispered, "the bunch Garrison is supplyin' guns to."

Chaffee nodded. There were Mexican soldiers in the group—slovenly-dressed in old ponchos; there were still poorer peons and half-breeds from the slums of Santa Fe.

"Don't look as if those hombres could do much against the regular Mexican army," Hogan said dubiously. "They'd run at the first shot."

"The big fellow," Chaffee said without emotion, "is Captain Manuel Garcia of the Mexican army."

"Mexican army?" Hogan murmured. "I didn't figure any o' the regulars would be with that crowd." He added: "Unless he deserted an' is thinkin' o' settin' himself up as a big man if they get their independence."

"We'll go back," Chaffee said. He started to crawl back again until they were a good distance from the campfires, and then rising to his feet, started to walk swiftly toward the horses.

Zack Hogan grasped his arm very suddenly. "Somebody out there," he whispered.

CHAFFEE slid a heavy .44 Dragoon Colt from his holster and held it in readiness. He could make out the two horses in the darkness, and another horse a few yards away with a rider.

"Hello?" a man called cautiously.

Zack Hogan sniffed. "Garrison?" he called.

"Come up." Floyd Garrison laughed. "Mighty glad to see you boys. I got lost chasing that herd and I've been looking for the camp for two hours."

Chaffee walked up, the gun still in his hand.

"I heard your horses whinny," Garrison was saying, "and I recognized your buckskin, Chaffee, when I struck a match." He added, "That our camp up ahead?"

"No," Chaffee said quietly. "Party of Mexican soldiers. Our camp is in the opposite direction."

"Mexican soldiers?" Garrison murmured in surprise. "Hell!"

"Under the circumstances," Chaffee said, "I think you'd better stay away from them." He climbed into the saddle, putting the gun away.

"I'm not anxious to have a run-in with them," Garrison chuckled.

"Didn't think you would," Chaffee observed. They rode back to the Arkansas River and crossed it to the wagon corral.

Garrison left them in the shadows on the other bank and went up to Buckmaster's wagons.

Slipping the saddle from the back of the buckskin, Chaffee heard the step behind him. He tied the animal to a wagon tongue and turned around. It was Julia Henderson.

"Mr. Garrison was lost on that buffalo hunt," she said. "Did you see him, Mr. Chaffee?"

"We brought him in," Chaffee told her briefly. "He was a half dozen miles on the other bank of the river." Fires were burning brightly all around the corral, but the girl stood in the shadows as she spoke and Chaffee could not see her face clearly. He had an idea she'd been watching for Garrison and had heard the horses coming across the river. "Garrison mean that much to you?" he asked suddenly.

Julia Henderson paused. "Why do you ask?" she said. Her voice was very calm, not the voice of a woman who had been worrying for her lover.

Chaffee slapped the flank of the buckskin, feeling his face tingle. He'd put himself in a curious light and he knew it.

"I was wondering," he muttered.

Julia Henderson touched his arm. "You have been disappointed, Mr. Chaffee," she said quietly, "and it has made you bitter inside. I wish you would do me a favor."

"What is that?" Chaffee asked.

"Do not judge all women by the one who has harmed you," Miss Henderson said softly. With that she walked away, and Bart Chaffee could still feel the place where her fingers had rested.

## CHAPTER V

### *Float a War Away*

ZACK HOGAN looked up at him as he came into the firelight. Hogan had a schooner of coffee in his hands. The other teamsters were scattered around the two Chaffee fires, out of hearing. Looking up toward Buckmaster's wagons, Chaffee saw Floyd Garrison chatting with the giant trader.

"What do you make of it?" Hogan asked softly.

"Garrison was not lost," Chaffee said calmly. "Any man knows enough to fire his gun a few times when he's lost on the plains. There were no shots."

"You think he tailed after us?" Hogan asked.

"No," Chaffee said. "It was an accident, his finding our horses."

"Then he was lookin' for that Mexican camp," Hogan scowled. "What in hell does that mean, Chaffee?"

Bart Chaffee poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it with relish. He watched Buckmaster and Garrison farther down along the line of wagons. Then he walked toward the Henderson's tent and called softly:

"Mr. Henderson?"

Jud Henderson came out and Chaffee walked into the shadows between two wagons. Henderson followed curiously.

"You know a Captain Manuel Garcia of the Mexican army?" Chaffee asked him. He saw the slim man start and he knew he was on the right track.

"There is a Colonel Garcia," Henderson said quietly. "Why do you ask?"

"He's across the river a half dozen miles off the trail with a hundred men," Bart Chaffee said. "Mean anything to you?"

Henderson smiled and leaned back against the wagon box. "Why do you ask?" he said.

Chaffee smiled also. "I fought in the Texan army," he stated.

Jud Henderson straightened up immediately and grasped his hand. "Wish I had known this before," he murmured. "You know the cargo Buckmaster is carrying for Garrison?"

Chaffee nodded. "I turned Garrison down when he came to me. I wish now that I hadn't."

"Why?" Henderson smiled.

"I'd know where those guns were going," Chaffee told him.

"Didn't Floyd Garrison tell you?" Henderson asked.

"They're to arm the New Mexico peons," Chaffee said, "in their fight for independence. So Garrison says."

"He's right," Jud Henderson said bitterly, "on one point. I've followed those guns all the way from Pittsburgh down the Ohio, up the Mississippi, and the Missouri."

"You're a representative of the Texas Republic," Chaffee said. "I suspected it."

*The heavy butt of Buckmaster's rifle smashed the Mexican's head as if it were an egg.*

Henderson nodded. "We had word that an American citizen was bringing an enormous cargo of guns to New Mexico where a people's army was being formed, Colonel Manuel Garcia in command."

"And the purpose of that army?" Chaffee said softly.

"To march against Texas from the north," Henderson garted, "while the main Mexican army crosses the Rio Grande from the south. We're to be hit from both sides at once, squeezed in a pincers, our own weak army knocked out, and the province re-annexed by Mexico City."

"How do you propose to stop it?" Chaffee wanted to know.

Henderson shook his head. "I've been writing to Houston steadily to send up a troop to overtake the caravan, but I'm not sure whether my dispatches are getting through. The Mexican Govern-

ment has spies in Houston, and they may have intercepted my letters. I've heard nothing."

Chaffee nodded. "Garcia must have expected trouble, and that is why he's brought that band of guerillas up with him to escort the train at a distance." He paused. "You have any plans now?"

"After we reach San Miquel," Jud Henderson said slowly, "and no Texan troops arrive, I intend to burn Buckmaster's wagons."

Chaffee stared into the darkness. "You know what that means," he said grimly. "A man like Colonel Garcia is liable to burn you in a slow fire yourself."

HENDERSON didn't speak for a moment. Then he said, "I'm thinking of Travis, and Crockett, and all the men who died at Goliath."

"Might have a little trouble," Chaffee said, "setting a dozen wagons on fire."

"I'll have to risk it," Henderson said hopelessly. "I can't let them go through without a try."

"Wait till I have a talk with Buckmaster," Chaffee advised.

"Buckmaster?" Henderson muttered.

Chaffee nodded, smiling a little. "George Buckmaster was one of Fannin's men at Goliath. He was lucky enough to escape that march of death."

"Another Texas fighter!" Henderson ejaculated.

"I don't think he'll want those guns to reach Santa Fe either," Chaffee stated. "He doesn't have any use for that rotten government down in Mexico City."

"We'll have to act fast," Henderson said. "The closer we get to Santa Fe the worse it'll become."

"We'll act tonight if possible." Chaffee smiled grimly. "Or in the morning."

He waited till nearly midnight before strolling up to Buckmaster's wagons. The giant's teamsters were huddled in blankets on the ground with the exception of three men who seemed to be standing watch. These eyed Chaffee coldly as he came up; but recognizing him, they said nothing.

"Where is George?" Chaffee asked one of them.

The man pointed to a wagon where a tarpaulin had been slung across one side. Buckmaster was sleeping underneath the wagon bed. Chaffee crawled under and shook the giant's shoulder. The fact that Buckmaster had men standing guard inside the camp indicated that Garrison feared just such a plot as Henderson had concocted.

"What in hell—?" Buckmaster growled.

"All right, George," Chaffee whispered. "How far away is Garrison?"

"Sleeps under the lead wagon," Buckmaster muttered, "up front."

Rapidly, Chaffee explained the purpose of the guns, Buckmaster listening intently. When he'd finished, the giant grated:

"That snake told me they were for the rebellion. I'll pull out o' line tomorrow an' head back for Westport."

"You won't get far." Chaffee smiled mirthlessly. He told Buckmaster about the force Colonel Garcia had brought up.

"Manuel Garcia!" Buckmaster snarled. "I'm thinkin' he was the man behind that massacre at Goliath. I owe him one."

"Can you trust your men?" Chaffee asked.

"Every one of 'em"—Buckmaster grinned—"or I'll beat their brains out."

Bart Chaffee related his plan briefly, Buckmaster's grin getting broader all the time.

"If we can cache the guns," Chaffee explained, "they can be picked up by a Texan force coming into the country later. It'll be better than destroying them."

"Can you get rid o' Garrison?" Buckmaster wanted to know.

"I think so," Chaffee said. He had another hurried conference with Jud Henderson and his sister before retiring for a few hours' rest. Zack Hogan listened to the plan intently.

"I can have the boys saw through an axle," he said, "so we'll have to hold up."

"Buckmaster will have trouble rounding up his mules," Chaffee said, "and Miss Henderson is asking Garrison to ride up ahead with her just as the caravan starts."

"I'm thinkin'," Hogan said chuckling, "that Floyd Garrison is in fer a surprise when he takes off them tarpaulins in Santa Fe."

CHAFFEE got up at four in the morning just as the cooks were stirring up the campfires, and the drovers were hurrying out for their animals. He saw Zack Hogan standing near one of his wagons, cursing at a teamster, and then he looked up Johnson Graves, the wagon-boss.

"We'll make the crossing later," Chaffee told the man. "Having a little trouble with the wagons."

Graves, a heavy-set man with red hair, nodded. "You can come along with Buckmaster's outfit," he said. "George claims he lost a half dozen mules an' he'll have to search for 'em."

"Trouble comes together," Chaffee observed as he walked off. Up near Buckmaster's wagons, he saw Julia Henderson chatting with Floyd Garrison. She was in riding clothes, and laughing as she spoke. Later, Chaffee saw the two of them ride off with an advance party as it crossed the Arkansas. Once Garrison glanced back at Buckmaster's wagons, and then he looked at Chaffee queerly as the trader stood in front of his fire sipping a cup of hot coffee.

Jud Henderson came over to watch the group splashing across the river.

"Everything working out?" he asked quietly.

"No trouble," Chaffee said. Wagons far up front started to pull out and move into the water, which came up to the wagon beds. Chaffee walked upriver a short distance until he found a sandy grade. When he came back Buckmaster was

talking with Jud Henderson. The last wagon in the caravan was just pulling out of the Arkansas on the opposite bank more than half a mile away. The line moved up over a sandy ridge and disappeared on the other side.

"Ready to go?" Buckmaster asked grimly.

"Hitch up," Chaffee said. Zack Hogan gave the orders, and Buckmaster's mules were hitched to Chaffee's dozen Conestogas. In a very short time the twelve wagons were rolling out into the river, Buckmaster riding with them. He waved a hand from midstream.

"Damn' if I can tell 'em apart myself," Hogan muttered, staring at Buckmaster's wagons lined up along the edge of the river.

"We'll get them out in the river," said Chaffee. "They have to be around that bend before any one rides back to look for us." He pointed downstream to a point a quarter of a mile away, where the Arkansas made a sharp turn.

"Hitch up!" Zack Hogan shouted to his bewildered teamsters.

The men, unquestioningly, led their oxen into the traces of Buckmaster's wagons, and Hogan had them rolled up to the sandy embankment Chaffee had decided upon.

Quickly, the lead wagon was jacked up, and the wheels jerked off. Four pair of oxen dragged the wheelless wagon down the slope and into the river where it floated.

"Damn lucky we had all them wagon beds' seams pitched twice." Hogan grinned. "I didn't figure we'd be usin' 'em as sailboats!"

The oxen were led out of the traces again and walked up on the bank as the first wagon, with two men sitting on top of the load, started to drift downstream. A soft breeze made it sway slightly but there was not sufficient force to topple the wagon.

Another wagon was rolled up to the embankment, the wheels taken off, and the wagon dragged out into the water. In an incredibly short time the twelve Conestogas were floating downstream and the oxen heading back for Westport with four men driving them.

BART CHAFFEE sat up on top of the last wagon in the line as it was caught by the slow current and turned downstream. Already, he'd noticed that the first four wagons were around the bend, and another just disappearing.

"All the men have their instructions?" he asked Hogan.

The redhead nodded. "They got tow lines up on top the wagons. When they hit Logan Island they scramble off the wagon an' wrap one end around the nearest tree. They pull it ashore, unload an' take the wagon apart."

Chaffee smiled. Logan Island was five miles downstream—a small, heavily wooded islet where they could cache the gun cases with little chance of anyone stumbling on them.

"Anybody comes lookin' fer us," Hogan said, chuckling, "they'll think we went straight up into the air, Chaffee."

## CHAPTER VI

### *Siege In Water*

ANOTHER FIFTEEN MINUTES and they were around the bend. Chaffee could see the dozen Conestogas drifting easily with the current, separated from each other by about two hundred yards of water, two men sitting on top of each load. It was eight o'clock in the morning with a bright sun reflecting on the river.

"We ain't movin' too fast," Zack Hogan said, a half hour later.

Chaffee nodded grimly. The current at this spot was very slow and the dozen wagons semed to be standing still in the water.

"A hell of a thing," Hogan growled, "if Garcia should come along now. He could pick off each wagon as it came up—like pickin' cherries from a tree." He added with a short laugh: "Ain't much chance o' steerin' these things or holdin' 'em back once they're started. How far is that island now, Chaffee?"

*(Continued on page 84)*

# ORNERY CUSS

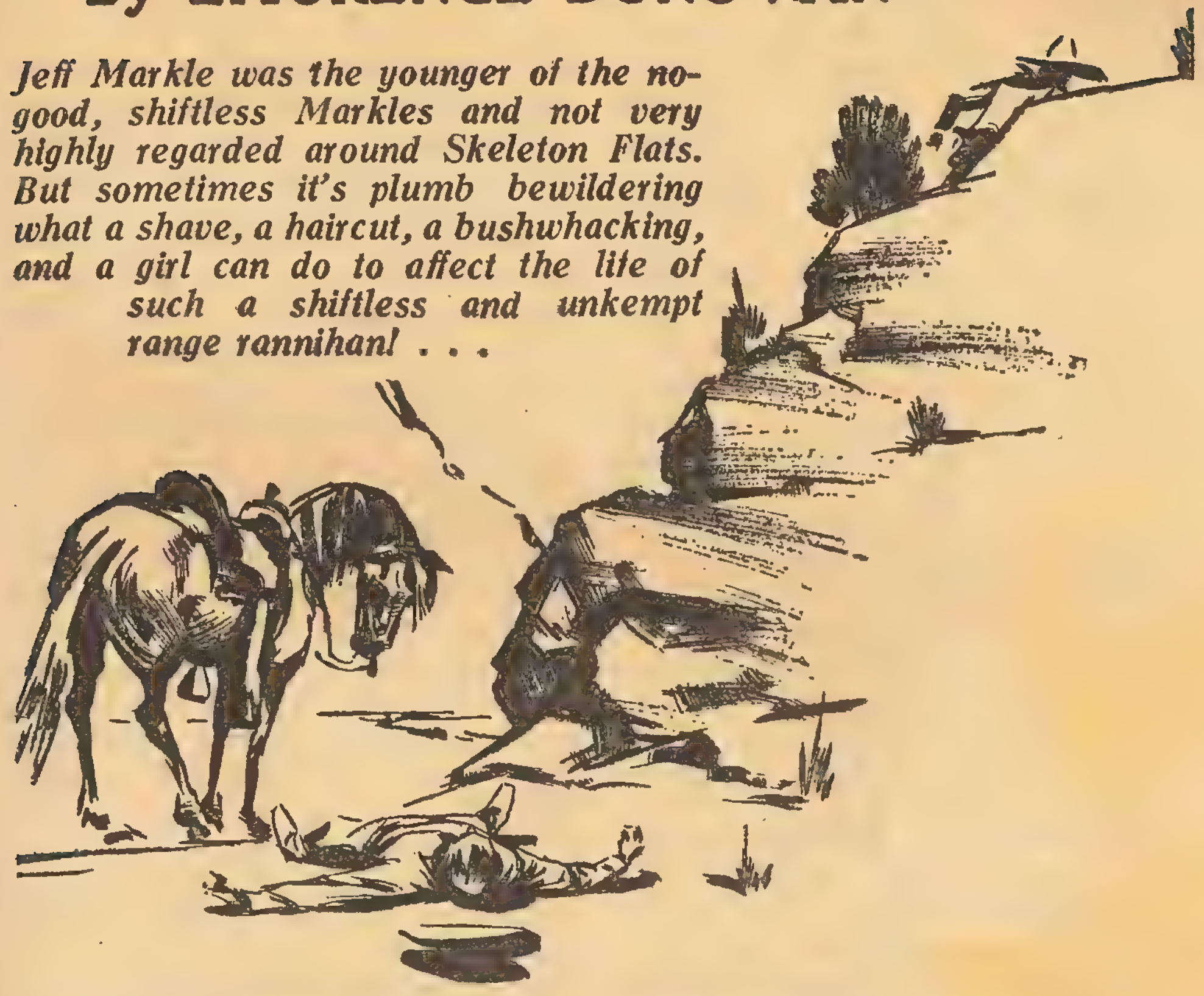
*He hadn't much of a target, but Jeff snapped one shot at the fleeing ambusher—and knew he must have missed.*

BEING ONE of the Markles, Jeff should've shied away from the ruckus in the Red Dog Saloon. Jeff ought've kept it in mind that he was the younkest son of the orneriest family on Skeleton Flats.

Being thus branded by birth as an ornery cuss. Jeff Markle should've kept his battered Stetson over his eyes and paid no heed to the Jensen brothers when they ganged up to get Ed Latham. Maybe if it hadn't been for Julia Latham lifting her lacy petticoats above the street dust and the late afternoon sun making her small, tanned face look like that of some angel, Jeff would have kept on recollectin' that he was an ornery cuss, and therefore have stayed in his place.

# By LAURENCE DONOVAN

*Jeff Markle was the younger of the no-good, shiftless Markles and not very highly regarded around Skeleton Flats. But sometimes it's plumb bewildering what a shave, a haircut, a bushwhacking, and a girl can do to affect the life of such a shiftless and unkempt range rannihan! . . .*



But the two Jensens, Bud and Shorty, were hardcases. Moreover, the Jensens had been aiming for a year or more to roust Julia and Ed Latham, her wild young brother, off their tight little pocket ranch in Devil's Tooth Canyon where they raised some neat horseflesh and also washed some profitable pokes of gold from the ever-running creek.

Aside from being ear-notched as one of the ornery Markles, a nondescript family that had done everything but run sheep on Skeleton Flats, Jeff always felt shivery and funnylike when he saw trim, dark-eyed Julia Latham. The way most folks shunned him in Blazeville, Jeff should've been smartened up to knowing he didn't stand a chance with the pretty but high-chinned Julia.

Coming back to this ruckus in the Red Dog:

There was Jeff Markle with his rangy six feet of ornery length slopped upon a tilted chair back by the wall. It was his habit to keep his Stetson brim low over his eyes with the faint hope that some folks wouldn't spot him as one of old Sam Markle's sons.

Zeb and Hawk Markle had been hauled in by Sheriff Barker a dozen times on the high-smellin' suspicion of slow-elking some of their neighbors' beef. Old Sam Markle had done some shootin'-up of several towns, it was said, and now lived precariously, with his three loutish boys and two gangling, snuff-chewin' gals, on the rim of Skeleton Flats closest to the border.

Old Sam was always huntin' cougar and wolves and such varmints as paid off some bounty. But it was more than vaguely rumored about that some pay-offs for wet cattle on the border, and occasional creek claim-jumping back in the Siskiyous made up the chief sustenance of the ornery Markles.

Mind you, none of this had ever been proved in court, or not enough so to hand

old Sam or Bud or Shorty the come-uppance most of the folks on Skeleton Flats and in Blazeville opined they had coming. To be sure, nothing definite, not even a chore of slow-elking, had ever been charged directly to Jeff, this younger son.

NEVERTHELESS, Jeff Markle should have stayed out of that ruckus between Ed Latham and the tough Jensens. Sitting at one side behind his hatbrim and two weeks' growth of yellow beard, Jeff had ought've kept in mind how ornery he was supposed to be.

But Jeff saw the neat figure of Julia Latham crossing the street from the general store, which Sheriff Barker ran on the side. At the same time a card table crashed over and young Ed Latham whipped to his feet, his dark eyes, like his sister's, sparkling with anger, and his fast knuckles smacking Shorty Jensen on his stubbly chin.

Jeff Markle didn't move yet. Shorty Jensen was broad-faced and broad-built, about as easy to put down as a Hereford bull. So Shorty only staggered, roared an oath, and charged back upon Ed Latham with his head down.

Jeff squinted his eyes and saw that Shorty should've kept his chin up and his eyes open. For Ed Latham was fast and he side-stepped just far enough to lift Shorty's chin for him. The crack of Ed's knuckles put Shorty Jensen flat on his hunkers this time.

Then there was Julia Latham, right there in the open doorway of the Red Dog, having stepped over to loop brother Ed from his usual weakness for whiskey and gambling. Julia had a small, heavy package of what might have been ten-penny nails or maybe fence-wire staples, and she had it drawn back to let it fly.

But Jeff Markle's sharp blue eyes saw that Julia's part in the ruckus would be too late. Bud Jensen was off to one side. Because this offish business of such a gal being in the doorway of the Red Dog had turned nearly all eyes, perhaps only Jeff Markle saw Bud Jensen snake his .45 from its holster.

Ed Latham failed to see this move of Bud's, and Ed had made no move to draw. But Jeff had been dragged up in the hard school of an ornery family where you had to be on your toes if you didn't want to be beaten up every so often. That made his senses extra keen.

Thus it happened that Jeff's front chair legs cracked down on the floor. Jeff's rangy length was launched directly at Ed Latham, him being the nighest. Just to make sure, Jeff uncoupled a whizzer with his left fist, connecting under Ed Latham's right ear.

Ed Latham tripped and went down. His forehead bumped the floor where the sawdust was thinnest, and Ed rolled over and looked at nothing with glazed eyes. This probably saved his life.

Seeing this Bud Jensen was too smart to trigger the gun he had drawn. Instead, he slipped the iron back into its leather, shagged over and dragged his brother Shorty to his feet.

Jeff Markle was a trifle mixed up on what happened right after that, a state of blankness being produced in him by what felt like the flat side of an axe banging into the butt of his ear.

Dizzied, with the inside of his yellow-haired skull buzzing like a swarm of bees, Jeff Markle sat down flat in the sawdust. A pound or two of ten-penny nails spilled from a busted brown paper package that had been flung with accidental accuracy by the flashing-eyed Julia Latham.

"Sneaking onto my brother, and hitting him from behind, you—" Little Julia appeared for the moment to lack the proper word or the boldness to use the language that was boiling up inside her, and she finished off with, "You hairy polecat!"

Jeff returned to hazy consciousness only in time to hear the words "hairy polecat" in a voice that gave him pleasant chills.

Jeff managed to see that Bud Jensen was herding his brother Shorty out of the Red Dog. Then Ed Latham was on his feet, weaving some, and staring at Julia.

"You get yourself right outta this place, sis!" said Ed Latham, his voice

thickened by too much redeye, and his mind apparently fogged up on who or what had laid him low. "This ain't no place for you to be," added Ed Latham, taking his sister's arm and conducting her to the Red Dog doorway.

JEFF MARKLE brushed sawdust off of his old riding clothes and made himself as inconspicuous as possible. He had it in mind that he should argufy Ed Latham into leaving with his sister, but just enough sense percolated through his muddled mind to keep him from doing it.

Little Julia Latham was white-faced and prettier than ever, but she went away with an armful of store bundles, minus the pound or so of ten-penny nails that had put a bump under Jeff Markle's ear. Ed Latham went over to the bar and swigged down three drinks, and he wasn't sobered enough to inquire what or who had downed him, or why.

All of which left Jeff Markle, the ornery cuss, with but one idea rankling in his innards.

"Called me a hairy polecat, she did," intoned Jeff miserably.

Jeff rubbed his curling yellow beard and touched his neck-long hair reflectively.

"Maybe she'd think some diff'runt if I got this wool sheared off, only pap will raise the roof if I show up at home all duded up like," argued Jeff with himself.

But an hour later Nate Parsons, the Blazeville barber, was cussing over his dulled shears and a razor he'd have to hone down again. And Jeff Markle looked at his shorn head and shaven face in the mirror and wondered some if this could be him.

Jeff Markle was a fair-looking galoot, with a reasonable high forehead, bony cheeks and a stubborn jaw. Seeing what Nate Parsons had done for him, Jeff went over to the general store and bought himself a new short. He put this on out behind the livery stable.

"Reckon she wouldn't think I'm a hairy polecat if she could have a look-see at me now," reflected Jeff Markle. "But there ain't ary excuse for her seein' me 'fore Pap whales the tar outta me on account o' losin' my hair an' buyin' a clean shirt."

"Wouldn't o' knowed yuh, Jeff," admired Tucker, the livery-stable man. "Yuh don't look like none o' the Markles I ever seen up to this time."

That was what Jeff was fearin' most, which made up his mind to ride the long way home. The upper Skeleton Flats trail cut over nigh to the Latham cabin and maybe Julia might have a chance to see him.

"Guess I'd best not ride right up an' explain I only hit Ed to keep him from bein' salivated by that sneaky Bud Jensen," said Jeff as he jobbed his gaunted sorrel out of Blazeville. "Nope, I'd a heap liken to have Julia see I ain't no hairy polecat, but I reckon I'd be smart to hide out from pap an' wait until maybe Ed gits home an' tells how it was between him an' the Jensens."

FUNNY how a shave and a haircut and a clean shirt can change any jasper. The transformation in the youngest of the ornery Markles was almost a miracle.

It went deeper, too, than just the tight-drawn hide of his newly clean young face. Something started Jeff singing to himself. Danged if he wasn't almost persuaded he should ride right on to the Latham cabin and tell the spunky Julia how it had come about.

Suddenly Jeff realized that another rider was but a short distance ahead of his ambling sorrel. Jeff was overtaking this rider because the other horse had slowed to a walk and the rider was staying in the saddle only by hanging to leather with both hands.

"Dang Ed Latham's fool hide," muttered Jeff. "He had to go an' take himself on a skinful o' that Red Dog redeye. Maybe so if I'd sort o' see him home, it'd bring Julia to looken on me as some diff'runt from a hairy polecat."

Jeff started to rowel his horse, but he pulled the beast in at once.

"Nope, 'twouldn't be so smart a notion," he reasoned aloud, in which Jeff

*Julia grabbed her brother's fancy .45 from the holster and she pointed it right at Jeff's lean, shrinking stomach.*

voiced a wisdom far beyond his years.

About this time, anyway, Jeff heard the clumping of another horse. Here the creek trail leading to the Latham cabin was flanked on one side by a steep ridge of shale. This was covered thickly with mesquite and thorn bush, and was not a place for easy riding.

The weaving Ed Latham was some fifty yards or so ahead of Jeff at a bend of the trail. Jeff glanced upward, but saw only the peak of another rider's hat on the ridge above the mesquite.

It came to Jeff all of a sudden that the jasper on the ridge might be trailing Ed Latham. But the truth of it didn't come soon enough.

The ridge rider pulled down out of sight. There was one sharp crack of a rifle. Up ahead of Jeff, Ed Latham let go

of the saddlehorn and slid from the hull with all the limpness of an empty sack.

Jeff's movement was instinctive. He was toting his .30-30 coyote-and-varmint gun in the saddle boot and he snatched it out. Jeff had but a glimpse of the ridge ambusher's dark figure as he came to his feet and jumped for his saddle, but not enough to identify the gulcher by either face or size.

He hadn't much of a target, but Jeff snapped one shot at the fleeing ambusher. Jeff knew he must have missed, for the horse on the ridge pounded away and the sound of it was quickly lost. Jeff's mind was instantly upon the Jensen brothers, but he could not say whether it was Bud or Shorty, and it could have been other than either of the Jensens.

WHEN Jeff Markle pushed up to where Ed Latham was lying all huddled beside the trail, with his peaceable roan horse standing nearby, it appeared as if the gulcher had put a bullet right into Ed Latham's brain.

Swearing at himself for missing the ambusher, Jeff still had his .30-30 gripped

in his hand when he slid from his saddle. His worn boots had barely touched the ground when running ponies and a rattling buckboard whipped around the bend in the trail from the direction of the Latham cabin.

"You . . . you killer!" It was the clear, cutting voice of Julia Latham. "Put up your hands and drop that murder gun!"

"But, ma'am, I didn't—" Jeff stammered.

"Drop the gun, stranger, 'fore I drill you as I ought to do, anyway!"

Julia Latham's dark eyes flashed fire back of the neat, small rifle she had swung up as she halted the ponies by running them upon the shale bank. The hammer of the little rifle snicked with meaning.

"But . . . but—"

Right there this newly shorn and shaved specimen of the ornery Markles had a real glimmer of intelligence. Julia Latham had called him *stranger*.

"By jiggers!" thought Jeff. "She ain't knowin' me. Hour or so ago she called me a hairy polecat. And now—"

His new and sudden quickening of the mind caused him to let his rifle drop to the ground. The unexpected arrival of the enticing Julia hadn't allowed Jeff time for considered thought, a process for which he never had been notable. When it came to using his mind, Jeff had always found himself in a rut.

This was especially true with respect to Miss Julia Latham. Ever since he had been a moon-sick fifteen—he was now twenty-odd—Jeff Markle had always been trying to think up some excuse for being where he could look at Julia Latham. She had been around eleven when he had been fifteen.

"I'm not knowing why you shot my brother from the back, whoever you are!" exclaimed the girl breathlessly. "But you're putting him in this buckboard, and you're driving to Blazeville where Sheriff Barker can get the doctor."

Jeff gave up all notion of trying to deny that he had shot Ed Latham. The other ornery Markles always said Jeff was contrary-minded, and at this moment Jeff suffered a stroke of what was for him brilliant thinking.

This was the way his stubborn mind worked under his now short-cropped yellow hair:

*Supposing Julia Latham keeps on thinking I'm a stranger. Supposing I don't tell her about the gulcher on the ridge. Supposing I make it look like I'm sorry and want to take her brother's place for the chores that have to be done around the Latham ranch. Supposing the shooting looked like a sort of accident.*

Jeff was doing his supposing as he obeyed the girl and bent over Ed Latham to lift him into the bed of the buckboard. It was then that he saw that Ed Latham wasn't completely killed.

THE gulcher's lead had parted Ed Latham's hair and gouged his scalp. But Ed was breathing natural-like. His forehead had bumped a rock when he had fallen and there was a bruise. But Jeff had seen enough lead poisoning to know when a case was likely to prove fatal, and Ed Latham didn't look like that kind of a case.

As he was lifting the lean and weighty Ed into the buckboard, Jeff had his inspiration. Julia's little rifle stayed in position to cause serious trouble with his innards if she got nervous, so Jeff took it easy.

"I tell yuh, ma'am, yuh got me all wrong," said Jeff as he walked slowly around to the driver seat, the point of the rifle only a few inches from his brisket. "I wasn't nowise shootin' at your brother at all. I seen a rattler up there in the mesquite an' I potted at him. The lead slanted off a rock an' took your brother on the head, and—"

"Shut up and take the reins!" commanded Julia firmly. "I'm riding back here with my brother, and if you so much as turn your head I'll split your backbone!"

"Yes'm," said Jeff meekly, making as if to walk past the girl. "I'm sure wantin' to git him to the doctor an'—"

Jeff's big hand shot out and knocked the girl's rifle to one side. The gun ex-

ploded, but Jeff twisted the barrel and held the weapon in his hands.

"I'll kill you for that—I'll—!"

Jeff thought Julia had never looked prettier than when her dark blue eyes blazed like that. There was a humorous crinkle around his own blue eyes—but Jeff had never heretofore suspected that, on account of too much beard and hair.

"You'll taken your brother an' hold him easylike," directed Jeff, amazed at his own sudden calmness, and not quite knowing this was because for the first time he was being mistaken for some other jigger than one of the ornery Markles.

"I'm aimin' to git your brother home an' talk on that wire phone for Doc Sawyer to come right out," added Jeff. "It's nigher, an' yuh wouldn't be wantin' him to die drivin' all the way to town."

The girl's eyes widened and she stared at him.

"You know a heap for a stranger," flared Julia. "How come you know we live close and about that new phone wire, and Doc Sawyer?"

"Been lookin' for a feller that lives on Skeleton Flats, an' I been in Blazeville some spell. That was how I met up with Doc Sawyer," lied Jeff blandly. "Want I should show yuh the rock where I shot at that snake an' the bullet bounced onto your brother's head?"

By this time the girl had discovered that Ed Latham's skull gouge wasn't so deep. Ed's breath would have curled a porcupine's quills, and maybe Julia had a notion that had something to do with him staying asleep.

"There wasn't any snake, mister, and as soon as Doc Sawyer starts out here I'm calling Sheriff Barker!" declared Julia. "If Ed don't get well, I'm seeing you're hanged, that's what I am."

Jeff clucked at the ponies and turned the buckboard. His own sorrel and Ed Latham's roan followed when he put the ponies into a clicking pace.

Julia's effort to prevent her brother from being badly jolted kept her quiet until they turned into the cabin clearing. Jeff took both rifles then and unloaded them, pocketing the shells.

JEFF MARKLE carried Ed Latham into the cabin. It was the first time the youngest of the ornery Markles had been inside such a neat, clean house.

White curtains were looped back at the windows. All the furniture was spic and span and polished. Jeff drew in his breath as he saw a scrubbed floor. There wasn't even the inch or so of mud off the men's boots that always lay upon the floor of the ornery and shiftless Markles.

Jeff put Ed Latham on a bed so soft it made him yawn. Then he started pulling off Ed's riding clothes. It was Ed Latham's idea of style to wear a brightly checked shirt, cord riding breeches, fancy boots and a shiny Mex sombrero with jingling conchas.

As he stripped these Jeff was plumb surprised at himself. He had an idea. Made it up in his own mind. As if bringing his skull out for air by shearing off his long, yellow mat of hair had opened the bars for some thoughts of his own to get through.

Jeff saved the idea for later. He piled up Ed's dudish duds. The trim, pretty Julia was winding the crank of the phone wire box.

"And please, Doc Sawyer, make it as fast as you can," said Julia. "I'm afraid Ed may be dying. He was gulched by—"

Jeff had examined Ed's head wound and Ed was breathing all right. Jeff was beside Julia with two long strides. His big hand seized upon the phone-box wire and yanked it loose.

"Next thing yuh'd be callin' Sheriff Barker," said Jeff. "An' when he finds out I'm a Markle—"

Jeff bit the end of his tongue. But it was too late.

"That's it! I might have known it! I haven't seen you for a couple of years, but it was you hit my brother in the saloon!"

Little Julia had crossed the room as quick as a cat while she was speaking. She had told the truth. Maybe she hadn't seen Jeff Markle to know him for two years, but Jeff had seen Julia plenty of times. He'd watched her riding along the creek.

And he'd been admiring her from a

distance often enough when she made trips to Blazeville. But she wouldn't have known him now if he hadn't opened his big yap about being a Markle.

Jeff's young face had been bleached a lot under his lost yellow beard. Now it turned as red as a turkey's wattles.

"Yup, I'm Jeff Markle," gulped the ornery cuss. "But I didn't nowise shoot at Ed, I didn't."

"You busted the phone 'cause you're afraid of Sheriff Barker!" flamed the girl. "But you'll be waiting right here until Doc Sawyer can bring the sheriff, that's what you'll be!"

Jeff's supposing wasn't working out right. He'd imagined if Julia believed the shooting of Ed was an accident, he could stick around and do Ed's chores while Ed was laid up. That way he would be close to Julia and maybe she'd come to like him a little.

But Julia changed all of that suddenly. She'd grabbed her brother's pearl-handled, fancy .45 from the holster Jeff had carelessly slung over a chair back. She pointed it right at Jeff's lean and shrinking stomach.

"Set yourself right down into that nighest chair and don't move!" ordered the girl.

JEFF MARKLE didn't know that he had come to the high spot of his ornery career. Outside the afternoon was fading and the sun was disappearing in the gap.

The ranch milk cows had set up the kind of bawling that every ranch hand would recognize. It was past regular milking time. Out in the horse corral a pony nickered impatiently.

That passed along even to the pigpen, where a half dozen porkers joined the chorus with their oink-oinking.

Jeff could see the ponies still hitched to the buckboard.

All the time little Julia kept the gun pointed.

"Set down, like I'm telling you, Jeff Markle!" she repeated.

Jeff didn't sit down. Instead, he grinned a little, then he turned his straight back squarely upon the girl.

"Time the chores was gettin' done," he said calmly. "Them cows has to be milked, because they're sufferin'. The hosses has to be turned out to night pasture, an' them pigs has to be slopped. Doc Sawyer ain't gittin' here for 'most an hour, an' you'll hafta be settin' with Ed in case he comes to himself. It's my bounden duty to do up the chores ontil Ed's on his feet again."

"Set down—!"

Jeff felt a chill along his spine, but he walked slowly toward the door and through it, without once cocking his eyes upon the gun in Julia's hand. Jeff went right out and started unhitching the buckboard team first of all.

"Well, never in all my born days did I ever think a Markle would have the—"

Julia bit her red lips and didn't quite say what she didn't think a Markle would have. But she looked at the busted phone wire, then she wet a cold towel and placed it upon her brother's head.

Ed Latham didn't even stir. Julia felt his pulse. It seemed good, almost as strong as Ed's Red Dog breath.

Julia could hear Jeff Markle herding the half dozen milk cows into the barn. Ed Latham still hadn't shown signs of awakening when Jeff clumped into the lean-to kitchen and plunked down several full pails of milk.

Jeff glanced into the big room. Julia still was sitting beside her brother. The .45 with the fancy handle was lying on the floor.

Jeff went out and poured feed for the clamoring pigs. He was in the barn hanging up the harness from the buckboard ponies when Doc Sawyer rode his sweating beast into the clearing.

"JEFF MARKLE admitted he shot Ed," said Julia to Doc Sawyer. And Jeff was in the kitchen, skimming the cream off a milk jar, so he heard it. "Said he was shooting at a snake and the bullet glanced off a rock and hit Ed."

"H'mm!" came from Doc Sawyer. "Could be so, I reckon. Them Markles is

ornery as sin, but old Sam would whup the daylights outta Jeff if he thought he'd gulched Ed. Old Sam has shot up towns, an' the whole passel o' them ain't worth their salt, but old Sam would be shamed as anything if one of the boys turned out to be a sneakin' ambursher."

Jeff scuttled outside, so he didn't hear what Julia replied. Jeff was danged sure Doc Sawyer would know that wasn't a glancing bullet had hit Ed Latham over the ear.

It was dark now when Doc Sawyer came out. Jeff had been rubbing down Doc's sweated horse.

"How's he, Doc?" asked Jeff.

"H'mm!" grunted Doc Sawyer. "Ed ain't likely to turn up his toes, but he's got a bad concussion. Might be he won't be conscious or talkin' for a day or two, maybe a week. His skull ain't cracked. Funny that bullet didn't flatten on the rock you told Julia about, and tear off the side of Ed's scalp. Clean, straight shot that was, Jeff."

Jeff nodded and said, "Yup—guess 'twas. Reckon I'll stick around an' do up Ed's chores. Yuh comin' back tomorrow, Doc?"

"Yup. Ed might be talkin' then an' he might not."

Jeff's forehead was all screwed up. What he had thought up just then had almost overtaxed his mind.

"Liken for yuh to do somethin' for me in town, Doc," said Jeff. "Reckon Julia told yuh to send out Sheriff Barker?"

"Nope, Jeff, she didn't," said Doc Sawyer.

Jeff stared at him, then he grinned. After which he talked fast.

"You're plumb loco, an' you'll like as not git yourself kilt," said Doc Sawyer. "But by cracky!"

Julia's face in the lamplight caused Jeff to swallow hard. She looked more like an angel than ever, sitting there beside her brother's bed. But she had picked up Ed's gun and had it lying in her lap.

Jeff stuck in his head. He had dumped firewood into the box.

"If yuh want to git some sleep, I'll be settin' up with Ed," offered Jeff.

"No," said Julia shortly. "I couldn't sleep. Maybe Sheriff Barker will be riding out, and I want to be awake."

Jeff didn't let her see his slow grin then.

"That bein' so, Miss Julia, I'll bed down in the hay barn," said Jeff. "Pay no mind to the mornin' chores. I'll git at the milkin' right early. Least I can do is take Ed's place, seein' it was my careless shootin' that got him accidental-like."

"I don't need—" began Julia, then changed it. "I'll be havin' one of the other neighbors help out with the chores."

"Nope, it's my place," said Jeff, and clumped out.

JEFF kept an eye upon the cabin where he could see Julia either sitting by Ed's bed or moving about. Jeff also kept his ears keened for any suspicious sound, like maybe a sneaking rider or a skulker, but he heard nothing.

Jeff tried sleeping some, but he didn't close his eyes. In the darkness he got up and rubbed down Ed Latham's roan horse. Then he mended a tear in Ed's fancy saddle.

It was close to morning before Jeff made sure that Julia had fallen asleep. She was still sitting beside Ed's bed. Ed had not stirred. For a big lout Jeff could move noiselessly.

Jeff scarcely breathed until he had gathered up all of Ed's fancy duds and collected the pearl-handled six-shooter from Julia's lap. A board creaked as he left the cabin and Jeff held his breath. He needn't have, for Julia's eyes were open and she was smiling.

Jeff herded the cows in and had them milked before daylight. The east was turning gray when Jeff forked Ed Latham's roan horse and walked the gelding quietly down the creek.

Jeff's final, quick glimpse of Julia showed her apparently sleeping in the chair beside her brother's bed.

Jeff was irked some by Ed Latham's fancy clothes. He had put on all of Ed's duds from his hand-sewn boots to his black Mex sombrero. He kept the 'brero pulled low over his forehead.

Riding Ed's roan, in his hand-tooled saddle, and wearing Ed's white-handled six-shooter, Jeff Markle looked enough like the wounded man to pass for him except at the closest range.

And the ornery Markle cuss rode erect and felt like he was somebody, thus clothed and mounted. He had his own rifle in the boot of the saddle, but otherwise he was Ed Latham, riding down the ever-running creek on early morning business.

Jeff took down the bars and rode onto the Bar T spread of Bud and Shorty Jensen about a mile below the Latham cabin. Here he held the roan to the middle of the creek bottom, which placed high ground and bushy points some distance away on both sides.

As Doc Sawyer had said, Jeff Markle was like as not to get himself killed. For he was ambush bait, no less. From what he had told Doc Sawyer to pass out in town, the gulcher who had shot Ed Latham would be hiding somewhere along the creek to finish the chore in which he had failed the day before.

For this was what Jeff had passed along to Doc Sawyer:

"Yuh tell 'em in town that Ed Latham was only nicked, an' that he seen the smelly skunk which tried to gulch him. An' yuh tell 'em, so's the whole town knows, that Ed Latham's ridin' the first thing in the morning to git that skunk. Yuh tell 'em, Doc, yuh tried to talk Ed Latham outta it, but he wouldn't listen."

The way Jeff figured it, the gulcher had to be one of the Jensens, who wanted the Latham pocket ranch. Either Shorty or Bud had tried killing Ed Latham from ambush.

That was why Doc Sawyer had said Jeff was loco. And it was a locoed notion, for Jeff was riding the creek trail directly to the Jensen ranch house. Jeff was sure one or both of the Jensens would have been back in Blazeville and got the word that Doc Sawyer passed out.

All of which made Jeff Markle appear dumber than his yellow beard and long hair had made him seem the day before in the Red Dog saloon. Riding out like this, plumb certain to get himself ambushed and shot.

HOWEVER, Jeff had a point in his favor. The ornery Markles had been brought up half wild. Jeff had eyes that could spot a chipmunk or a mountain rat nigh a hundred yards away.

Jeff depended upon the white shine of this early morning sun. He was convinced he could detect the gleam of a rifle barrel on either creek slope before it could be fired. He rode straight in the saddle, his narrowed blue eyes boring the bushes and rocks from one side to the other.

Jeff's eyes and instinct proved good. The sun struck the metal of a rifle that was suddenly stuck through bushes no more than fifty yards to his left side.

"Reckon I'm a danged fool an' figured it too fine," muttered Jeff.

But his almost uncanny sighting of that rifle shine started him falling from the roan's saddle a split second ahead of the explosion. The ambusher was a dead shot. That bullet should have drilled Jeff through the skull.

But as he was falling, the lead zipped viciously across the back of his neck, cutting a thin, red furrow that stung painfully. Then Jeff Markle landed on the creek gravel, sprawling, his arms loose. He was holding his breath now.

Having been informed he had missed the day before, the gulcher would make sure of his kill this time. And he might shoot again before he became visible.

Bud Jensen did just that and the second bullet tore through Jeff's left shoulder, causing him to grind his teeth as the lead nipped the point of the bone.

But Jeff still sprawled. Only one hand had slipped back and down. Bud Jensen was tall where his brother was short. Bud Jensen came striding down the slope, his rifle crooked over his arm.

Jeff pulled in his breath and waited. For an ornery Markle, Jeff had done some tall thinking. He had been sure the guilty gulcher would do just this, come close up to be certain that Ed Latham was dead.

But Jeff had failed to figure Shorty

Jensen being in on this. Jeff heard the crunch of other boots. Shorty Jensen was shagging down the other slope, also cradling a rifle.

"Won't they be su'prised when they git close an' find out they been shootin' at a Markle 'stead o' Ed Latham," thought Jeff.

He grinned some at the idea of the surprise, then he wondered what he had to grin about.

Shorty Jensen called out:

"Catch up that roan hoss, Bud! If we drive the beast into the quicksand at the creek elbow, an' put Ed Latham's carcass with his hoss, there won't be nothin' but the marks o' where he rid into the bog!"

"That's what I was figurin', Shorty," replied Bud. "Ed didn't show a lick of sense braggin' to Doc Sawyer that he was gonna git a gulcher, an' that he seen me yesterday."

Whereupon Bud Jensen turned toward the straying roan horse.

Jeff didn't appear to move. His hand still lay on the ground as he triggered the .45 that belonged to Ed Latham.

Bud Jensen appeared to take an extra running stride toward the roan horse. But he fell in the middle of the stride and his rifle splashed into the creek.

Shorty Jensen cursed and whipped up his rifle, centering upon Jeff. But Jeff was rolling and the bullet only ripped up gravel where his head had been.

Jeff wasn't a killer. Bud Jensen had been Jeff's first victim. He was a little sick over it. When he thumbed the hammer of the .45 this time, Shorty Jensen screamed much like the high squeal of a stuck pig.

Shorty Jensen's rifle clattered to the rocks. Shorty's right arm flopped around as any arm will when the elbow had been shattered.

Jeff Markle got to his feet. Shorty Jensen stopped screaming and stared at him.

"Yuh ain't Ed Latham! Yuh—yuh—!"

"Yup, I'm Ed Latham," said Jeff solemnly, "ontil Ed's up an' about, an' yuh can start shaggin' up the creek. I'm wantin' yuh should tell Julia Latham I ain't the gulcher who shot Ed off his hoss."

"I FETCHED Sheriff Barker along," said Doc Sawyer, as he patched up ornery Jeff Markle's shoulder and bandaged the back of his neck. "Figured he'd have a chore to do, seein' you was out of your mind, Jeff."

Sheriff Barked pulled at his long mustache and looked at Shorty Jensen, whose broken arm had been splinted.

"Reckon you won't be stayin' around Skeleton Flats, willya, Shorty?" said Sheriff Barker reflectively. "I ain't wantin' to be clutterin' up the jail an' takin' time off from the store, in case you was thinkin' o' pullin' outta the county. Seein' the Markles ain't ever owned more'n a smatterin' of ground, maybe so your Bar T spread would make a right smart passel o' land for Jeff Markle to git started onto."

Shorty Jensen glared at Sheriff Barker.

"There ain't ary law says I'm havin' to give up our spread!" growled Shorty. "Nobody can make me do it!"

Sheriff Barker stared dreamily over the tops of the creek cottonwoods.

"That's so, Shorty," admitted the sheriff, rubbing a finger along his hooked nose. "There ain't such a law. Reckon I'll jest have to haul you to jail then, an' take time off from the store to see that you git fifteen to twenty years at Deer Lodge Prison, which is what old Judge Roslyn most allus hands out for an ambush shootin'."

Shorty Jensen swallowed hard.

"Thinkin' on it, I ain't honin' much to stay on Skeleton Flats," said Shorty. "I'll be ridin', so's yuh won't have to be openin' up the jail."

Jeff Markle heard Doc Sawyer talking to Julia Latham.

"Ed'll be right as rain in a couple-a weeks, but he's gotta take it easy for a spell," said Doc Sawyer. "I reckon Jeff ain't bunged up too much to sort o' look after your chores, if he's so inclined."

"I'm so inclined," stated Jeff quickly. "Only Miss Julia was sayin' she was thinkin' come neighbor would help out. But maybe so she'll be lettin' me do the chorin' for a spell ontil I git my hair an'

*(Continued on page 93)*

# The One-horsepower Press

***He was a newspaper editor alone in a rawhide frontier town which was rodded by a polecat—but editor Gates found a startling and plumb fresh meaning for the old phrase "power of the press"!***

LYSANDER GATES fought the watery nervousness that crawled in the pit of his stomach again, and looked on past Eben Thorp and out through the opened window of the Junction City *Herald*. Across the wind-scrubbed prairie that edged the town, Indian Road stretched toward the horizon until it wound sharply around the distant base of Green Butte.

Lysander brought his gaze back until it swept the interior of the small fron-

# By HAROLD R. STOAKES

*The ferret-like little man spun half around as the short-barreled six-gun rocked in Lysander's hand. Lysander drove three more savage slugs into his body.*

tier newspaper shop. Behind him, he knew, Snubber McLean was silently waiting to hear what he would say to Eben Thorp.

Eben thrust his pigmy frame even closer to the office counter, his weasel-sharp face tilted upwards. A thin muscle jerked slyly along the razor edge of Eben's jaw.

"When men come to the West, we like to get straight answers from 'em," Eben crackled with bantam impatience. "You aimin' to be a trouble-makin' newspaper man?"

Lysander looked at Snubber's shadow, stretched like a salamander across the splintered floor. Impotent anger contracted Lysander's thoughts, as though

anger coursed soddenly along the veins of his body, but when he moved his shoulders the rawness of flannel rubbed against the welted scars that Chio bullwips had left on his back.

Lysander's shoulders slumped. "I'm not aiming to make trouble," he said tiredly.

He saw the disdainful, twisting smile on Eben's face as the little man turned away.

"Mind you don't," Eben snapped authoritatively. "The last editor gave me and the Citizens Committee a heap of bother."

Lysander watched Eben's brittle steps across the dusty street toward the Junction City bank. Nature had made Eben Thorp small, but many a big man had discovered too late that Eben's bantam hands were endowed with a speed that made up for their smallness, and that Eben's hand-tailored guns ruled a Western empire larger than many an Eastern state.

Back by the Washington hand press, Snubber tripped over an empty chase. The chase clanged noisily against the stone make-up table as it careened to the floor. When Lysander turned, Snubber's eyes were heavy with disapproval.

"Maybe you got a lot of Ohio ways to forget before you're sized out right for a Western editor," Snubber said dourly. A carroty swatch of hair flounced like a tumbleweed on Snubber's forehead.

"Meaning?" Lysander questioned defensively.

Snubber pulled a California job case open, his thick fingers rumaging through the type.

"Out here a man either stands for right . . . or he stands for wrong." Snubber paused. "It's kinda simple, and there ain't no in-between. Either way, a newspaperman don't stand much of a chance."

LYSANDER felt the bristling of his shirt against scar welts as he straightened. Back in Ohio a girl had talked the way Snubber was talking now —and he had listened . . . too much.

"Where did the last editor that owned this claim-sheet stand?" Lysander questioned. The purchase of the Junction City *Herald* had somehow included Snubber as a part of the bargain.

"For the right mostly, when he got around to it," Snubber said bitingly. "Only he forgot to get himself a short-barreled six-gun and lots of practice."

Snubber jostled a small piece of type between thick fingers.

"That's all a Western editor needs," Snubber said slowly. "After awhile, when he gets so he can knock the cross bar off a tiny little six-point T tossed in the air, he's ready to sit down and start writing."

Lysander looked up sharply. "So the last editor ran afoul of Eben Thorp."

Snubber shrugged. "Why else do you think the place was for sale for half its worth?"

Lysander looked around. It was true that the *Herald* had sold for a song. It had one of the few drum-cylinder presses in the territory, brought all the way from Pittsburgh. The drum cylinder was turned by hand, but it did a good job.

The bullwhip scars itched across Lysander's back, and he lowered his head.

"How should I know where I stand?" he said stubbornly. "I never saw Eben until today. I can't prove things about him—good or bad."

"You'll find the West's a tolerably fast teacher," Snubber said dryly.

LYSANDER thrust his make-up rule below the masthead of page one, and pushed the tightly blocked type in the form down further in the chase. People were always wanting a newspaper man to fight their battles for them—battles they didn't have the guts to fight themselves.

From a case of fourteen-point black gothic type, Lysander carefully set a line of type. When it was filled out, he inserted it just below the masthead. Snubber read the line over his shoulder: TURN THY EDGED SWORD.

"What's that?" Snubber questioned suspiciously.

Lysander hung the wooden job stick alongside the type cases. "It might be Shakespeare," he said. "It could be a lot of things."

"Sounds like fightin' words."

"Maybe."

Lysander turned back to the stone. Snubber McLean wouldn't understand a mindful Ohio girl who sat cross-legged reading Shakespeare, her lips twisted noiselessly with the forming of the words. Or maybe he would.

Candace Lawler had talked the way Snubber did. "Turn thy edged sword," she had said, reading from the book, and the words had taken on form and violence, until the sentence itself formed rapiers with which they dueled. Candy Lawler had wanted him to fight the battle of the underground slave traffic.

Lysander tightened the quoins at the bottom of the page, his eyes broodingly alive like the midnight coals of a prairie campfire. He had kissed Candy once, and there was meaning in their kiss. Only it wasn't long after that the deadness had started growing in her eyes, until finally she had gone West with her folks, banishing him from her thoughts.

After she had gone, Lysander had tried to see things her way, and had fought the battle of the underground. For thanks, he had seen his newspaper office smashed, and had felt the scourging bullwhips of tight-lipped townsmen. He wondered what she would have said then if she had watched that night, standing in the thickets of a moonless borderline Ohio grove. And where were the others—the eager abolitionists whose cause he had championed?

Lysander wet his lips on the sourness of the thought. Folks had said he would find her out around Junction City and he had come West, not knowing that "around Junction City" circumscribed the area of a small empire. The Lawlers were close-mouthed folk, and lived to themselves.

Lysander looked again at the square letters of the type under the masthead.

Perhaps somewhere in a lamplit prairie shack, Candy Lawler would read this line, moving her lips noiselessly, and come to see if he had changed.

To Snubber, Lysander said bitingly: "A man's a heap sight better off minding his own business."

THREE MONTHS LATER, Lysander sat in the tissue-like glimmering of morning sunlight that filtered across his desk. Since that first visit, Eben Thorp had stayed across the street in the bank.

On the surface things ran smoothly in Junction City. By land fraud when he could, by force when he couldn't, Eben inexorably encroached on the homesteaders, stretching his bony talons across the earth.

Lysander spun his chair back impatiently, and stalked moodily over to the stone. Eben's blood-sucking of the land would go on until Eben had what he wanted—and there wasn't much any one man could do to stop him.

Outside Snubber pounded the last nails into a crudely constructed turnstile. A turn shaft extended from the stile through a hole cut in the building, and was attached to the drum cylinder. Through the window, Lysander watched Snubber hitch a horse to the contraption. With the horse walking in a circle, the way Ohio sorghum mills were run, the turn shaft would run the press.

Snubber stomped back inside, grinning complacently.

"I always been aimin' to rig up a labor-savin' gadget," Snubber said happily. "I ain't a workin' man by choice—just sheer necessity."

Lysander glanced at the pages on the bed of the press. He peered closer at the black gothic line under the masthead. Gummy ink was mashed down along the flattened edges of the letters. If Candy Lawler had read those words, she had given no sign.

The drum cyclinder grumbled heavily, shaking the flimsy structure of the building.

"Better keep a gentle horse on that rigging," Lysander said bitterly, "or

you'll shake the building down on our heads."

LYSANDER turned swiftly as a charred buckboard careened to a stop outside the newspaper office. The back of the wagon was half burned away. On the seat, a scrawny woman huddled over a fretful child. The man who swayed into the office was powerful of build, but his clothes were burned to shreds, his eyes heavy with sleeplessness.

"We was burned out last night," he said dully. "Our outbuildin's were fired, and our stock driven off." He sat down soddenly, a moistness smarting in his smoke-swollen eyes. "The name's Jim Glover, if you want to print it."

Lysander signaled Snubber to stop the press.

"Know who did it?" Lysander questioned.

Glover angrily brandished red, singed knuckles. "They was Indian moccasin prints around the outbuildin's, but they ain't been an Indian within fifty miles of the place."

Glover heaved himself up, and paced agitatedly past the stone.

"It was Eben Thorp done it," Glover flared chokingly. "Eben and his hired murderers." He spun tensely. "You can print that in your newspaper, too. And you can tell Eben Thorp—"

Lysander stopped writing. "Why don't you tell Eben youreself?" Lysander asked sharply. "He's right across the street."

Jim Glover shot a venomous glance toward the Junction City National Bank. "I'm aimin' to," he said darkly, "and you can tell the rest of 'em."

"Can you show proof it was Eben?" Lysander questioned.

"Proof!" Glover's voice rumbled around the shaky foundation of the building. "What you wantin' with more proof than you're gettin'? Ain't old Eben the only land vulture in Junction City? Ain't he the only money-shark with a hired string of gun-slicks on his payroll? Them Indian moccasin prints was just a trick."

"Maybe so," Lysander said pointedly, "but you can't say it in a newspaper if you can't prove it in a courtroom."

Glover rocked heavily on his heels. His eyes glowed bitterly.

"I should have known Eben would get an editor in here of his own stripe," he said thickly. "The last editor was helpin' us organize. He was out lookin' for proof and glad when we brung it to him."

Glover crossed the street with rock-like strides. Lysander felt an itching across the tight scar flesh on his back. Candy Lawler would have seen things Glover's way, only she wasn't a man. Candy had never felt the slashing of bull-whips across bare bleeding flesh.

Through the window of the bank, Lysander watched Glover gesture wildly, towering more than a head taller than Eben. Then Glover's lumbering hands sprawled out and seized the bantam banker by the shoulders. Even across the street, Lysander could almost hear Eben's teeth rattle from the violent shaking.

Glover released his feverish hold and turned to leave. Lysander felt a hard knot grab at his heart. Eben Thorp landed like a sharp-clawed ferret squarely on the big man's back. Eben's knees dug backbone as his hands cupped unexpectedly under Glover's chin and snapped back viciously.

Glover stumbled a few limp steps before he lurched into the powdery dust of the street. From the charred buckboard a woman screamed.

When they picked Glover up he breathed gaspingly before he died, his neck broken.

Back in the *Herald* office, Snubber lifted page one from the press, and put it back on the stone.

"Looks like you got something you can print now," Snubber said, his voice a monotone. "Something you seen with your own eyes."

LYSANDER lifted paragraphs off the news stories down the center column of the page, making room at the top of the column. Outside, Snubber unhitched the horse from the turn-wheel

contraption and turned the animal to graze near the newspaper office.

Lysander was just finishing the last of the story, ready to drop it into place, when he looked up. Eben Thorp strutted across the threshold. Behind Eben a gaunt, dark-faced gunman moved silently, hands on hips, so that his sallow fingers almost touched the butts of weather-beaten guns.

"You figure on printin' anything about Jim Glover's tripping as he left the bank?" Eben questioned craftily.

Lysander looked from Eben's knife-sharp face to the wraithlike gunman who hovered near the door.

"The way I saw it, Glover didn't trip," Lysander said tensely.

"Maybe you didn't see things right." Eben's voice was like a cat's purr as he stepped closer. The gunman moved like a shadow until he stood on the other side of Lysander. Lysander looked down at the type of page one lying between them.

"Me and the Citizens Committee feel you would be doin' the town a disservice if you was to print a story about it," Eben said unctiously. "Folks might think our sidewalks wasn't safe."

"Maybe they aren't," Lysander said bitterly. For that matter neither were the back trails. "A newspaperman's job is to tell things the way he sees them," Lysander added. "A man was killed in Junction City today. Folks consider that news."

Lysander looked searchingly at old Eben. That's the way it was. A man was killed, and it was the publisher's job to tell the story. He didn't have to start a crusade to do that.

Eben turned away, the muscles along his razor-edge jaw quivering nervously.

"It's yore paper," Eben said, shrugging. "I thought you'd want to know how the Citizen's Committee felt."

Lysander's eyes tightened incredulously, watching Eben move toward the door. It wasn't like Eben to give up so easily. Too late Lysander heard the scraping across the smooth-faced stone. When he snapped around, the type for page one

*Glover stumbled a few limp steps before he lurched into the street's powdery dust.*

plunged over the side of the table and crashed to the floor.

Lysander looked down at the twisted mass of leads and slugs and tiny pieces of type spewed across the floor.

"That was mighty careless of you, Sal," Eben said to the gaunt gunman. "You've gone and ruined a heap of printer's work."

"About ten hours," Lysander rapped. He looked at the silent gunman. The act had been deliberate. A heavy form of type couldn't be slid off a stone accidentally. It was intended as a warning.

"Don't matter much," Eben said, his face quivering slyly as he glanced out the window at the contraption that Snubber had built. "Folks don't bother to read a one-horsepower paper anyway."

AFTER Eben and the silent gunman had left, Lysander heard the back door close. When he turned around, Snubber was gone.

A half-hour later Snubber stumped

back inside the *Herald* office. When Lysander opened the package that Snubber dumped into his lap, he found himself looking at a short-barreled six-gun and holster. The gun chamber was already loaded and there were extra snub-nosed slugs in the gun belt.

"I figure you'd be needin' it now," Snubber said simply.

Lysander studied the gun, then rewrapped it silently and stuffed it into one of the already bulging drawers of the desk.

"I couldn't outdraw old Eben, nor any of his gun crew," Lysander said dully.

"But you could show 'em where you stood," Snubber argued.

Lysander's glance slid on past Snubber and leaped along the stretches of Indian Road. Somewhere out there on the plains were the men who were making the fight against Eben Thorp. He glanced back at the twisted wreckage of page one on the floor.

"Put the page back together," Lysander said with sudden determination, "and leave plenty of room down the center column. I'm going to look up Jim Glover's widow."

Glover had said the homesteaders were organizing to fight Eben. Mrs. Glover should know where they could be found.

When Lysander was ready to leave, Snubber pulled the six-gun from the drawer and unwrapped it again.

"Better take this along," Snubber said.

Lysander looked hesitantly at the gun, but there was wisdom in Snubber's advice. He buckled the gun on clumsily, and felt it flap lumpishly against his thigh when he walked.

"With this thing on," Lysander said bitingly, "I feel like a tinhorn damn' fool."

IT WAS LATE when Lysander returned. In the yellow lamplight Snubber's face look jaundiced as he finished the work of restoring page one to the stone. Lysander slumped wearily down at his desk.

"You seen Glover's widow?" Snubber questioned.

Lysander nodded. "I saw her, and a lot of the others."

He stood up and walked over to the stone.

"We'll be running the paper off tonight," Lysander said. "There'll be horsemen coming to the back door for copies as fast as they roll off the press."

He looked down at the gaping hole that Snubber had left down the center column of page one. He could fill that hole—fill it with flaming words that would incite an entire countryside to violence. Tiredness welled across the tightly scarred skin of his back.

"What's happenin'?" Snubber questioned expectantly.

"The homesteaders are declaring war. They're coming in tomorrow to wipe out Eben and his gunhands. They figure they've stood enough."

Snubber whistled through his teeth. "But what's the paper got to do with it?" Snubber asked.

The short-barreled gun cramped against Lysander's hip as he pressed closer to the stone. "The leaders figure it will help," Lysander said. "They've tried to get the homesteaders together before, but some folks need convincing. Maybe if the timid ones see it in black and white they'll join up."

"Kind of the prestige of the press," Snubber croaked.

Lysander looked out the window at the crude contraption that Snubber had built. Eben's words dug a welt through his memory.

"Yes," Lysander said, smiling ruefully. "Even the prestige of a one-horsepower press."

LYSANDER worked quickly alongside Snubber, setting the type to fill page one. When the story was finished, he looked at the page thoughtfully. Something more was needed.

Lysander read the small black letters again: TURN THY EDGED SWORD.

His eyes glazed as he lifted the line out of the chase. For three months the

message had gone across the plains, and if Candy Lawler had read it, there was no meaning in it for her.

Lysander's shoulders sagged as he opened a deeper space under the masthead. Then from a large font of type he set a banner headline:

HOMESTEADERS DECLARE WAR ON EBEN THORP!

Snubber looked on in satisfaction when the page was ready for the press.

"How we goin' to work the contraption?" Snubber asked. "One man will have to drive the horse."

Lysander glanced across at the bulky shadow of the Junction City bank. Eben would figure they were going to press late because of the smashed form, but sooner or later the gnomelike banker would come over to see what was in the paper.

"You drive the horse, and I'll feed the press," Lysander said, "but mind you drive it slow or you'll shake the roof down."

Snubber slipped into a frayed sweater.

"How'll I know how I'm doing?" Snubber asked.

Lysander paused thoughtfully. "If I yell 'Gee,' you can speed it up. If I yell 'Whoa,' slow it down." Lysander thought again of Eben, who would come with hand-tailored guns to fit his bantam claws. "If one 'Gee' isn't enough speed, I'll yell it twice."

WHEN Snubber started the horse, Lysander could feel the sudden vibration of the floor.

"Whoa!" he yelled, and Snubber slowed the press to less speed. Tawny fingers of light leaped across the whiteness of newsprint as Lysander fed the paper over the drum cylinder.

Time passed to the steady turning of the press. Cramped on a high stool, Lysander's leg forced the short-barreled gun up under the feed board.

By midnight, six range-hardened riders had stopped one by one at the back door, timing their visits with the instructions Lysander had given them. Then they pounded on into the night, carrying the homesteaders' challenge across the darkened plains. . . .

Lysander slumped over the feed board, feeling the rhythm of the press throughout the building, when Eben Thorp stepped soft-footedly inside the shop.

There was no stopping Eben from reading the flaming words of the *Herald* as the printed copies fell on the delivery board. Lysander saw Eben's face go hard, all the slyness gone, as though his bony jaw were a trap, the steel edges of it thrust tightly against his skin. Eben's hand-tailored guns were close to his fingers.

"So you've picked your side of the fence," Eben said unbelievingly, snarling the words.

Lysander nodded dully, and tried to marshal his tired thoughts. If Eben had waited a little longer it wouldn't have mattered. But now, there were still men who would come for papers to spread across the countryside. There was still time needed to spread the news—and for the homesteaders to assemble.

"*You* picked my side for me," Lysander sparred.

Eben moved, like a small ferret, around the side of the grinding press, ducking the delivery rods as they fanned down.

"Newspapermen are old women," Eben said contemptuously. "So long as they stay outside of things, we treat them special."

"Like Jim Glover's widow," Lysander said bitterly. "And when the newspapermen don't stay outside?"

Eben's hands moved in quick, tense answer.

LYSANDER tried to duck alongside the press, as he grabbled clumsily for his own gun. His thoughts churned frantically.

"Gee, gee, gee!" he shouted huskily, hoping that Snubber would catch the signal.

The drum cylinder leaped with new speed that rumbled through the building. Lysander saw Eben thrown almost off

*(Continued on page 94)*

# SADDLE BUM

*Simon, having made his play, turned toward the outlaw, and he was giving the other every break in the world.*

***The colorful rustler who called himself Big Gringo was a man of mystery, devastating the ranches in the Texas Brasada country—but he was no more mysterious than the tramp puncher who rode in on the HS spread to make enemies swift and deadly, and perhaps also to carry out a grim mission he considered strictly his own business!***

# By WILLIAM R. COX

HE WAS RIDING a gaunt buckskin. He had holes in his shirt. He had dirt all over him. His center-fire saddle was dilapidated, the wood showing through the worn leather. Worst of all, his boots were broken.

But he had a fine new Stetson and his gun was oiled and slick in a serviceable holster. He rode into the Jasper Strong hacienda along about evening, and Foreman Quirt met him at the door of the bunkhouse, scowling. Quirt was big as a house and muscular as a stallion. He had a hooked nose and sharp, discerning eyes. He was a tough foreman and he looked it, and sometimes he was cruel, but he was a good man for Jasper Strong.

Quirt said to the saddle bum, "We need a man, but you're no brush-popper. We're a top outfit. Our HS men have to hold their own with the Crooked S and the Cross J." The HS brand derived from the words Hacienda Strong.

The rider climbed down. He was lean and high-shouldered and he had mild blue eyes, in a sort of nondescript face. He looked puny alongside of Quirt. He said, "I'm middlin' fair when I have to be. Can I chuck?"

Quirt said, "You ridin' the line or lookin' for a job?"

"I can work the brush," said the man. "Name's Simon."

Quirt said, "Don't you ever give a direct answer, Simon?"

Simon straddled a moment, seeming to peek from under his hat brim at the towering foreman. He said, "I'm jest a simple waddy. If you want to hire me, I'll work."

"Simple Simon!" exploded Quirt. "If I wasn't short-handed!"

But he hired Simon Haskell. We needed anyone who could pop that brush. The Hacienda Strong was snuggled into the Brasada, down on the border where rustling was easy for the buscaderos and the war was on between outlaws and the great ranch owners. Me and Max and Jughaid, the colored boy, were the nucleus of the outfit, the rest of whom were Mexicans, great riders but not such great fighters. Jasper Strong was short of cash then, and Missy had come back from school and we all were tying into it, trying to make the place pay. It was rough going and devil take the hindmost.

THE next morning Simon borrowed my chaps to put on over some clean Levis he produced, and Mac gave him a shirt. He was such a mild, nice sort of coot we enjoyed giving him the stuff. We ate, went outside and Quirt had Pixie ready for Simon.

Quirt always gave Pixie to a new man. It was rough, but it was a way of finding out things. Pixie was a head-weary bucker who seemed about to die any moment, but actually would sunfish you to hell in thirty seconds. Nobody had ever ridden Pixie.

Missy came out just as Simon topped the bronc. Missy had yellow hair and deep brown eyes and skin like the top of the milk. She was a little girl, but she had fire and she worked, like all of us. She took a look at what was going on and came over to me and said, "The new man looks as though Pixie would kill him."

I said, "There they go!"

Pixie was doing his act. It was a great show. After a few seconds Missy said. "What's the longest ride on Pixie?"

"Twenty-eight seconds," I said, looking at my old watch.

She said, "The new man'll beat it."

I said, "He sits it easylike."

Missy said, "He's a rider."

Well, the Pixie horse got frantic, just like he knew he was being topped longer than before. He stopped humping at the sun and hit the dirt, hard and nasty, trying to pin Simon beneath him. Simon did not seem to try very hard, but he rolled out of the saddle and stood a few feet away, watching the horse. When Pixie scrambled to his feet, Simon was about to make a flying mount. I grabbed him, and Max and Jughaid handled Pixie.

Simon said, "He's got to be rode, don't he?"

"No," I said. "He's an outlaw. Nobody rides him."

Simon said, "Oh . . . Quirt was testin' me?"

"Everybody gets the same dose. It's a good idea," I said.

Simon said, "I don't know. . . ." He looked at Missy, and I saw Missy was looking hard at him. I introduced them.

Missy said, "Haskell? Are you from Ohio?"

"Texas is more like it, I reckon," he said. "If I'm from any place. . . . Nice here, ain't it?"

Missy said, "I knew a Haskell. . . . He came West from Ohio. . . . I was in school, five years ago, in Ohio. . . . A tall boy."

Simon said, "Mebbe Quirt wants me. I better go. . . ." He left us. He walked like a horseman.

I said, "He's no Ohioan."

"He sure looks like Billy Haskell," she said. "I nearly married Billy Haskell, Lou. He got into trouble and had to leave. He was hasty. I never told anyone, Lou."

She was always telling me stuff. I was there when she was born and she lost her mammy, and Jasper is a busy man, so she always followed me around, me being the wrangler and usually available.

I said, "Well, he's a horseman. Simple Simon, they call him in the bunkhouse."

She said, "If he's simple, I'm a plains cowboy."

She went away. Plains cowboys are okay, you understand, but in the Texas Brasada they ain't worth anything. When you throw a rope on the plains, you almost got to make your catch. When you throw a rope in a jungle, with branches hanging over your shoulder and mesquite so thick your horse has to wear a leather chest guard, you've got to be awful quick

*The Pixie horse got frantic. He stopped humping at the sun and hit the dirt hard, trying to pin Simon beneath him.*

and sure if you want to get anything but vegetable matter in your loop. Riding is different, too. You duck, in the brasada, or you get your block knocked off by tree limbs. You crash that brush, popping cows, and maybe you get thrown into a thorn thicket. It is mighty different in the brush.

QUIRT took Simple Simon into the brasada himself, the first time. Quirt was a bushman, born and bred, afraid of nothing. They were working to the south, while Max and Jughaid took the other vaqueros and worked north. Quirt and Simon came in silent and weary the next week, and they had only a couple of dozen small cows. Max and Jughaid brought in a hundred fair steers and said

there were more in the brush.

Quirt went in and saw Jasper, who was staying in Joetown trying to do business with the banks. Simon came into the bunkhouse and slept a whole day.

Before Quirt left he said to me, "Simon'll do for work. He's a queer one, but he can put his dab on anything he sights in the brush. But watch him. He's got somethin' on his simple mind."

I said, "Missy likes him."

Quirt said harshly, "You watch him. I don't trust him."

When Simon woke up he wasn't tired any more and he volunteered to help me with some wild ones I was breaking. He talked easily enough when there were just the two of us. He told me a few things, roundabout, such as: he was a Texas man, an orphan, he had been to school, he had seen better times. He had a steeliness in him. I could see that. Maybe that was why Quirt felt there was something wrong with Simon—it was steel striking on steel.

Missy began coming to the horse corral a lot. She would sit on the top rail and watch, when she had time, and we would break the young ones. Simon never seemed to strain himself, but he took the hardest jobs away from me without making any point about it. I liked him a lot from the first.

Quirt came back and called me and Simon into the bunkhouse, away from the Mexicans and from Missy. He said, "There's a gang of rustlers workin' south. Max is sendin' in cattle, but we didn't see anything but those sorry strays and some tracks. Jasper says it's ruination if we don't stop the rustlin'."

I said, "It must be some gang to be able to clean that country south of here."

"Must be twenty or thirty of 'em," said Quirt grimly. "I heerd in town there was a big rustler leadin' them. A tough fella, the rumor goes. Killed several Mexes already, just for the hell of it. They call him Big Gringo. Nobody knows his right name."

"His name ain't important," I said. "You reckon we better call in Max and Jughaid?"

Quirt said, "Yeah. I want Simon to go bring 'em in. Then we'll head south and see this Big Gringo."

Simon said, "I could ride south alone. Nobody knows I work for the HS yet. I could look around while Lou got Max and Jughaid."

Quirt said, "Are you tellin' me how to run things, Simple?"

"It's an idee, though," Simon said gently. "Mebbeso I could find this Big Gringo for you. We're awful small to fight fifteen or twenty men."

Quirt said, "Are you scared already, Simple?"

"It would be smart to locate this leader," Simon said. "If we could cut him out, mebbe the bunch would break up. They must be holdin' a lot of cattle now, if they hit the Crooked S and Cross J like they hit us."

"Say! Why don't we get Baldwin and Morgan in on this?" I asked. "Ain't they in it, too?"

BALDWIN owned the Crooked S, Morgan the Cross J. We all fit each other, but this was different, this was a rustler war. They ought to be in on it, I thought.

Quirt said harshly, "Jasper talked to 'em. They laughed. They said they ain't hurt. Their stuff is covered by the big crews they got. They don't know this Big Gringo can clean the ranches one at a time. He's startin' on the HS, but he'll git them, too, when we're done. They cain't see that."

"People is funny," said Simon. "Well . . . I'll be moseyin'."

Quirt shouted at him, "You git Max and Jughaid!"

Simon didn't answer. His buckskin had filled out some and was fit to hit the brush. I noticed he took his own saddle, but the funny thing was that he dressed in his old clothing, the stuff he had worn when he came to us. Quirt didn't notice, but I did. Quirt had told me to watch him, and I saw him pause at the big house and saw Missy come out and talk to him.

They talked quite a while standing close together on the ground, while the buck-

skin cropped grass off the lawn. Then Simon got on the horse and rode away. I followed him down the draw and he went north a ways, but he turned around and hooted like hell for the south when he got out of sight of the house.

I turned to go back, thinking I would talk to Missy about this. I almost ran into Quirt. He had fire in his eye. He said to me, "So he quit, huh?"

"Well, I dunno."

"He went south," said Quirt. "The son quit us without notice."

"I jest don't believe it," I said. "He's a good un. He can ride and he thinks straight and acts straight."

"I told him to go for Max!" roared Quirt. "He went the other way, didn't he?"

"Maybe he's set on goin' after this Big Gringo," I said.

"You ride for Max," said Quirt. He was sure sore. "You bring him back here and we'll go get Big Gringo—an' if Simple Simon's anyways around, I'll get him personal!"

"Missy likes him," I said. "You better talk to Missy."

"I take my orders from Jasper Strong!" Quirt bellowed. "You take yours from me, dammit, Lou! You leave Missy outa this!"

Well, I'd known Quirt all his life, and I knowed about Quirt and Missy, too. He had always been that way about her. He never said nothing to her that I knew about, but he never let any flash cowhands work for the HS, the kind that primp on the job and eye the boss's daughter, and he kept the young squirts from Joetown away from her. He was a very tough man, and he was loyal and he was good for the ranch. But he was warped about Missy. I guess he was in love with her, all right. . . .

I FOUND Max and Jughaid all right, and already they were beginning to run short on their calf count. They had the calves, branded them, turned them a-loose, but there wasn't enough cows to account for the number of yearlin's. Max

*I shot two of them as they started to run. I hated it, but they were outlaws.*

said, "We got a good Mex we kin leave in charge. Guess this is it, huh, Lou?"

"Yeah," I said. "We either show the Crooked S and the Cross J we can hold our own, or the bankers'll close in on Jasper."

"It's been a good ranch to work fer," said Max. "I'm willin' to go along."

Jughaid just showed his white teeth and patted his short gun. They were good men and they would fight hard. But if there was fifteen or twenty of the rustlers, all hard ones, it wouldn't be a very even fight. It would mean some of us would get hurt bad. We rode back to the ranch without saying very much to each other. It's okay to fight for your outfit, but you'd like to have an outside chance of saving your hide.

Quirt was in the biggest black rage I ever seen. It seems Simple Simon had sent a note back. Missy had received it, and had called Quirt in. She said to him, "Simon is on the track of Big Gringo. Simon is acting on my orders and working for us. Don't go charging around, shooting people on sight. Go down south there and check with Simon."

Quirt almost said bad words to Missy. He almost quit. He almost wouldn't go south. But he was honest, and he knew what had to be done. All he said was, "Missy, the way that Simon came in here, the way he is actin', I wouldn't be surprised if he was Big Gringo hisself!"

Then Missy laughed at Quirt and he stomped off and went to town. But Jasper told him to do what Missy said, that

Missy had something called "intuition," and that Jasper trusted her. It made Quirt all the madder.

When we come in, he said to me, "And when I seen Miguel, who knows a lot of things, he said Big Gringo's name was Askell. Now, when a Mex says 'Haskell,' he can't pronounce the H very good and it becomes Askell. Now, if Simple Simon ain't Big Gringo, then who is he, the dirty son?"

I said, "Miguel is a spy for every wetback rustler along the Rio. You goin' to believe Miguel?"

Quirt said, "I'm gonna shoot Simple Simon on sight an' look for answers later, that's what I'm gonna do!"

That's the way we rode south. Quirt was so mad he was looking more for Siman than the rustlers. There was only me and Max and Jughaid and Quirt—and Quirt was not hisself at all. He was so used to being boss of Hacienda Strong, and having the complete say over everything, that he was nearly crazy.

We rode very hard for two days, through the brush, and then we had to rest our horses, on account of we could not take extra mounts on a ride like that.

WE LOUNGED AROUND for one day, resting them and our ownselves. Riding the brush is rough work.

We had found tracks by then. Jughaid was the best I ever seen at reading track. He turned up the separate hoofprints of at least twenty riders. He also turned up the trail of Simon's buckskin, which had been shod by us, with our special shoes. He did not tell Quirt about that, but he told me.

I said, "He's out-ridin' the rustler's camp. If we follow him, we might do all right."

Jughaid said, "Pretty soon we got to go in, Lou. That Simon, he's followin' awful close. There's one big ole hoss that's got a deep print; Simon is allus behind him. Simon is closin' in on him. We got to go in, if we are a-goin'."

So I went to Quirt. I said, "We got to move in. Jughaid thinks they're over beyond the Antoscosa, in a ravine he knows. It's thet big draw, about the only place they could hold all them cattle they stole."

Quirt growled, "Yeah. I been thinkin' about it. . . . They musta made a deal over the Rio. They must be waitin' for a Mex gang to rustle some exchange steers. Then they could take the Mex cattle and nobody could read brand and say he owned 'em. Our cattle would be in Mexico, for sale. Big Gringo could drive the Mex cattle in the open. He could sell it right in Joetown, and nobody could stop him. They was a big steal in '74 when they did that."

I said, "I been thinkin' the same way. We better go in, huh, Quirt?"

"Yep," he said. He was more cheerful right away when I agreed with him and action seemed close to hand. He was a great one in a fight. He said, "If Simon's with 'em, don't nobody choose him. I want thet son for myself."

Jughaid rolled his eyes. Max, who was a little, bowlegged, leather-tough man, got out an extra revolver and began testing it. Jughaid stuck his rifle under his knee and we was ready. We had rested horses and plenty ammunition and Jughaid knew the way.

We was off our land, now, and down in the country nobody claimed. It was all brush and gully and hill and brush and cholla and mesquite. It was wild country, where anyone could do anything and never be seen, mostly. It was just past noon, and we had to hit them before night, because they knew this country even better than we could know it.

Quirt did not seem to notice, but we kept cutting Simon's trail. I seen it, and Jughaid kept jerking his head about to look at me. We rode single file, Jughaid in the lead, me next, then Max, with Quirt covering the rear in case they seen us and got behind us. We went quiet as we could, without spurs, but we must have made a lot of noise crashing in the brush. You can't go through the brasada without making noise.

We was going down this draw, very near to where Jughaid thought the rustlers would be, when Quirt called out to

us. "Dismount, and tie up the cayuses. "It's only about a mile and mebbe they got an outpost."

We got down. Jughaid whispered to me, "I ain't seen Simon's tracks fer a mile. But we ain't seen his hoss, neither."

I said, "Work up ahead. Take it slow till we see what goes in the hideout."

QUIRT came up and gave orders, spreading us out, so that we would come in four directions to the place. Jughaid did like I said, gaining some ground on us. He could squirm through brush better than any of us. I had the middle spot with him. I could see him ahead and I knew Quirt on the left and Max on the right would be a little behind us. I carried my rifle at ready, and Jughaid went so silent that he was past the guard and it was me saw him first.

He was a big, husky fella with a beard. I got close to him without making too much noise. He was dozing beside a tall tree which he was supposed to be watching from. If he had been in the tree, we would all have been killed, I guess.

I got my gun on him and woke him up. Nobody saw us. I took my rope and tied him up good. He kept cursing me, but he did not raise his voice. I said, "Who's your boss, rustler?"

"None of your cotton-pickin' business," he said.

I bent my gun against his skull, not too hard. I said, "To hang is bad, but if I turn Comanche on you, it'll be worse. . . . Who is this Big Gringo?"

"You'll find out," he said. He was tough, all right. "Haskell will burn you over a slow fire, you dumb puncher."

I knew he was a plains hand, then, because down in the Brasada you do not call them "punchers." I said, "You'll never see Kansas again, you cow thief." I gagged him with his *rebosa*. I was rough with him, mainly because he had said that Big Gringo was named "Haskell," I guess. I hated to think of that.

We were closing in then. I had to hustle to catch Jughaid and help hold the middle, Jughaid found a rise in the ground and we wigwagged to Max and Quirt. They came up, and we were not more than two hundred yards apart when we went in.

Jughaid raised his hand and we all stopped. We looked down from this rise, and there was the layout. It was a big draw, with plenty good grass. It had been cleared roughly, and the cattle were over beyond, where we could almost count them. They had a hell of a lot of them. Jasper Strong's brand was plain, and there was plenty Crooked S and Cross J cows, too, but not as many as ours.

There was about a dozen men lounging about. The others were holding the herd, which was not much of a job in this natural amphitheatre, but then most of them were northern hands and not brush-poppers—most of the horsemen, I mean. The ones lounging around were the tough ones, and I even recognized Billy Bart and Black Sam, a couple rustlers I knew.

Quirt was the leader, now, for sure. I seen him scanning the men down there eagerly. He was holding us back while he looked. I looked, too, but did not see Simon. I saw another man, a tall man. He looked a bit like Simon.

Quirt stared at this man, too. A couple of the outlaws were sitting near him and this man was giving them orders. There was two saddled horses waiting for this pair. Then a man came leading a big black, a fine stallion. The leader outlaw got up and he sure did look like Simon—but it wasn't Simon. Then was when I remembered things and began to get the general idee. . . .

"We'll go in," said Quirt. Jughaid heard him, passed me the sign. I gave it to Max. We got our guns ready, cocked the triggers.

THE SUN was midway down. It might have been three o'clock. Quirt gave one glare to our cattle and brought his rifle up. I knew he was aiming at the leader rustler. It was murder, in a sense, because they did not know we were there. But once we had started I knew they would slaughter us. Maybe I would have gone in and parleyed with them, under cover of our guns, of course.

Me, I'm kind of chicken-hearted thataway. But Quirt was a hard man, a tough man, and the Hacienda Strong was his only life, and his creed was to make HS big and good for Jasper and Missy, and that was the way he wanted it.

Jughaid was closest to them, and he got in the first shot. The sun was bright and we could see real good. Jughaid killed a man who was between the leader, Big Gringo it had to be, and some stacked rifles we could see. Jughaid was plenty smart. He lay there, firing his rifle careful, keeping them away from those stacked guns.

I shot two of them as they started to run. It was a bad thing for me, and I hated it, but they were outlaws. I shot Billy Bart, and I knew Billy had murdered a couple Mexicans and I played like I was getting even for them, but it was really for the Hacienda. And then I shot a little mean-looking man who was blazing away at us with six-guns, although the range was too long.

Max came in with his old Sharps and you could hear it above the other guns. Down below they were milling around, and some were diving for cover. The men with the herd were pretty far off, but you could see the dust as they rode in.

Quirt yelled, "I missed the son!"

The leader, Big Gringo, had jumped when Jughaid fired and Big Gringo got onto his horse. One of the two men he was talking to went down as Quirt smacked lead at them. The other got away. He jumped onto a horse and bent over the neck and rode out of range. We kept shooting and the outlaws began to get over their first surprise and take cover and shoot back. Jughaid and Max killed a couple of them, but maybe a dozen got cover. That was bad, and maybe Quirt made a mistake the way we jumped them, but we were in it now, and we had to fight them.

We kept moving. Not even then did we find Simon. We were moving around, ferreting out the outlaws, covering a lot of brush. But although we did good on the enemy, we never did come acrost Simon. Quirt got mad and went down almost to the edge of their camp. He knelt behind a stunted oak and began shooting as fast as I ever saw any man shoot.

They began directing all their fire at Quirt, and why he was not killed nobody will ever know. But he was not, and it gave me and Max and Jughaid a chance to work around and get a crossfire on a bunch of them in a thicket. We poured it on, and we made a shambles of that place.

The herders came up and got it right in the teeth, and they must have thought there were more of us, because when they saw Big Gringo had ridden away on his black horse they turned tail and went for the Border, and we never did see them again.

Outlaw Black Sam, who was a negro, like Jughaid, tried to organize those that were left. He got into the open doing this and Jughaid drew a bead on him. Jughaid called in his soft voice, "Black Sam, nigras like you give us other colored folks a bad name. So long, Black Sam." Then he shot Sam in the guts and they all broke and ran. They did not surrender, because that meant hanging. They just ran and took their chances.

Quirt said, "That'll do it. Let's go back and get our Mexes and bring in that cattle. Max and Jughaid can stay and clean up a bit and watch the herd. We better scurry after Big Gringo, you and me, Lou."

He said it quiet, but I knew he had no mind to let Big Gringo get out of the country. We started to ride.

IF IT HAD BEEN bad before, it was a hell of a lot worse going back. Quirt would not stop to water, scarcely. We went like the wind, heading for Hacienda Strong. As I rode I thought I knew what was in Quirt's mind. Big Gringo would be desperate, he would know which outfit we were, he knew our strength and that only Mexicans were back at the Hacienda. He might hit for there. And then Quirt also was wondering about Simon, and the name "Haskell" and what it meant. He was going to find out. . . .

We stumbled into the back lot. It was

early morning and we had not stopped except to water. Our horses were nearly dead on their feet. My mount never was any good after that.

We saw the yawning door of the bunkhouse and it worried us. There was no smoke from the chimney. Then we saw Missy run away from the house, fully dressed, her revolver in her hand. She was going around back, lickety-split.

Quirt said, hoarselike: "We're in time, I reckon."

We staggered after Missy, our legs buckling from the ride. We got around the corner of the house just as the action started. It was the kind of morning when the sun comes up gold color and everything is tinged with pink-gold and looks unreal and strange.

There was Simon, all right. His clothes were torn from the brush and he was gaunt and almost sick-looking. There was Big Gringo, who looked like Simon, but when you got close he did not look so much like him, at all. Big Gringo was handsomer and taller, and he had a colorful, tough look about him, and he was the kind the women go for, all right.

Quirt stopped and I stopped. There was two of them with Big Gringo, two of them that had escaped. They had their guns out. Big Gringo just stood there, sneering, sort of, at Simon, saying, "Well, cousin, long time no see."

Simon said, "I sure wanted to see you again. You always was a mean button."

Big Gringo said, "Is that any way to talk to your own cousin? In your last moments on earth?"

Missy barged right in among them with her gun. Big Gringo scarcely seemed to move, but he took it away from her and back-handed her against the wall.

I got out my old Colt, but Missy wasn't hurt and Quirt put his hand against me and whispered, "Wait! Let's see what goes here."

Missy said, "Simon! They'll kill you."

They had their guns on him and Simon stood slope-shouldered, right in the open, in the middle of the yard. There was a puppy playing with a couple kittens and the chickens kept walking around under the feet of the men with the guns. The milk cow mooed in the stable for her morning fodder. . . .

I was thinking that we could shoot only two of the outlaws before they would get in a shot of their own. There was Missy and there was Simon. We had only two short guns. I started to go back for my rifle, thinking I'd be better and faster with it, which shows how dumb I was, because there was not time to go for anything, of course. It was just the way my mind ran.

QUIRT had his gun in his fist and was crouched like a big cat, listening, straining. Simon said: "Sure, they'll kill me. I come down here expectin' to be killed. I come down here looking' for my cousin. I found him, too, and then Quirt hit the camp and I hadda chase my cousin all the way in, and my hoss was not up to it. I killed thet buckskin and hadda walk, which is why I was late. Oh, yes, they can kill me. But I got to see Cousin Billy."

Missy said, "Billy Haskell, you can't get away with this."

"You turned me down once," said Big Gringo. "You told me you'd marry only a Western man. Well, I'm a Wetsern man now!"

The two outlaws did not like all this talk. They had their hammers cocked and one said, "Lemme throw down on this hombre and git outa here . . ."

Big Gringo, or Billy Haskell, said, "I'll tell you when to take him. He's been hounding me long enough. But there are a couple of things—"

Simon said sharply, "You'd better draw! I'm coming for you, Billy! I'll get you, too!"

We could see Billy Haskell come alive at this. He had felt the upper hand, he had been giving orders. Now Simon was not lounging any more. He was moving and I never saw him move like that before. He was going to the left faster than any man had moved that day of fast movement . . .

He had more chance to the right, which would get one of the gunmen out of his

way, but he went to the left because that drew the fire away from Missy, where Big Gringo had shoved her. His face was tight and white and he had his gun out. It was the fastest draw I ever seen, his hand moving quicker than the eye, his gun coming up and out, straight, as though he was jabbing it at someone's body, his hand steady.

Quirt could move, too. Quirt knew and I knew that Simon was signing his death warrant when he did like he did. The two outlaws were no greenies. They were tightening up on their trigger-fingers, following Simon's quickness with their muzzles, when we came into view. Simon did not have as much chance as a tissue-paper cat in hell and we all knew it, except that Quirt and I were there, which Simon could not know.

Missy cried out something, but Quirt and I were pumping lead like mad, walking slowly, squinting through the smoke, which is the way you got to do in a fracas like this, always moving, always ready to shoot again. I've seen many a gunfight and I've never seen one like you hear about, where every bullet drops a man cold dead. Rifle fire is different, when you are set and have a good rest for your arm, but in pistol fights there is a lot of waste lead thrown.

Quirt and I made some hits, because Simon did not get killed by the two gunmen. Simon, having made his play, was turning around towards his cousin, Billy Haskell, the outlaw. He was thumbing his gun, and he was standing straight up to it, giving Billy every break in the world. Big Gringo was throwing lead too; he might have been an Easterner five years ago, when Missy was in school, but now he had already put one bullet into Simon, and had him down on his knee.

I GOT close enough to my man to put one in his head, a chancey thing, but I saw Simon was down and I wanted in on it with Big Gringo. But Quirt had already pinned his man down, dead as a mackerel, and was in my way when I wheeled, chucking bullets into my hog-leg. Quirt was throwing his empty gun at Big Gringo's head, jumping in with his bare hands.

Simon called clearly, "I've got him, Quirt!"

But Quirt had Big Gringo Billy Haskell by the throat and was taking his gun and throwing it away. He stood there, holding Big Gringo, and I thought Quirt would tear his throat apart. Quirt was saying in that hard voice, "Put your dirty hands on Missy, will you?"

Billy Haskell never did answer Quirt. While Quirt was shaking him, Big Gringo Haskell gave a tremendous shudder. Then he died. Quirt was slamming him around, and he was dead. Quirt got onto this and threw him like he was an empty sack against the fence. Then we could see that Simon had got him, all right. There were two neat holes right at the belt line. Simon had got him like a real gun fighter—in the middle, for keeps. How Billy stayed up and tried to keep on fighting is a miracle, but I guess it was that Haskell blood. It must have been fighting blood, all right, good or bad. . . .

Simon was getting up onto his feet, now. His left arm hung loose and there was blood on his torn shirt. There were three dead men in the yard and me and Quirt looked half dead, I guess, after that ride and everything.

Quirt said, "Simon . . . you were after him all the time?"

"There was talk," said Simon. "I heard his name plenty times before I came here."

Quirt said, "That's why you wanted to work for us?"

"At that time," said Simon. "That was the time I thought he was around and I was looking for him. He had the same name as me and it led to embarrassments."

Missy said, "Come in the house . . . Come in the house! . . . You're hurt, Simon . . . Oh, he's hurt you!"

Simon said, "I'm sorry I seemed strange to you, Quirt. You're a mighty good man."

Quirt did not say anything. We went and got blankets and covered the out-

laws up. Billy Haskell looked a whole lot more like Simon when he was dead. The Mexes were coming in at last and we had to arrange for burial and for sending men to drive in our herd that Max and Jughaid were guarding.

THEN we went into the house and Simon was in Jasper's own bed with Missy waiting on him hand and foot. The bullet had gone through, all the way. Quirt looked at it, tended to it. Quirt was a great hand with wounds and sick people. He did not look or act like he would be any good, but he was. He said, "You won't need no doc if you do like I say."

Simon grinned at him. "Don't think I don't want to do like you say, Quirt. This was a personal thing with me and I thought maybe I could kill Billy and have done with it."

Quirt said, "I seen you go for him. I seen you do it when you figgered you would get killed doin' it."

Simon said, "What would you have done if it was *your* cousin murderin' and robbin' and giving your family a bad name?"

Quirt said, "I dunno what I would do if two men held guns on me. I never had two men stick guns in my face at oncet."

Then Quirt went out. He did not even look at Missy. I looked at her. Then I went out, too.

Quirt said, "I reckon I'll go back and help bring in the herd."

I said, "Sure. I'll take care of things."

Quirt said, "He's a damn' good man. I made a mistake about him. He'll make her a damn' good husband."

He seemed to think that was enough. He took four Mexicans and started back, without food or sleep. Me, I had to eat and hit that bunk. I looked in on Simon before I went to sleep and he was sleeping easy.

Missy was sitting beside him. She looked at me and said, "He has all of Billy's qualities that were good. And none of the bad ones."

I said, "Why, sure, Missy. I allus liked him."

She said, "He owns a ranch up the river a couple hundred miles. He left it to run Billy down and kill him. He couldn't stand Billy ruining the name."

I said, "It'll be better if he has a ranch."

"Yes," she said. "Quirt loves it here. Quirt's a good man."

That's all she ever said about Quirt. The afternoon got cool and I went and got the sleep I needed so bad. . . .

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# MORNING

THE two of them slipped from their bare-backed mounts at the first shack where the Orisco Trail became the main street of the compact little settlement of Slocum before it emerged at the other end of town and swept away southward.

This shack had once been a shop of sorts, long and narrow. It had been gutted by fire until the snow-laden roof had caved in and quenched the flames. On the fringe of town and with nothing worth saving, it was left alone with its blackened walls and blank windows. At one side was a section of the hitching rail and here the two men tied their horses and the one pack animal.

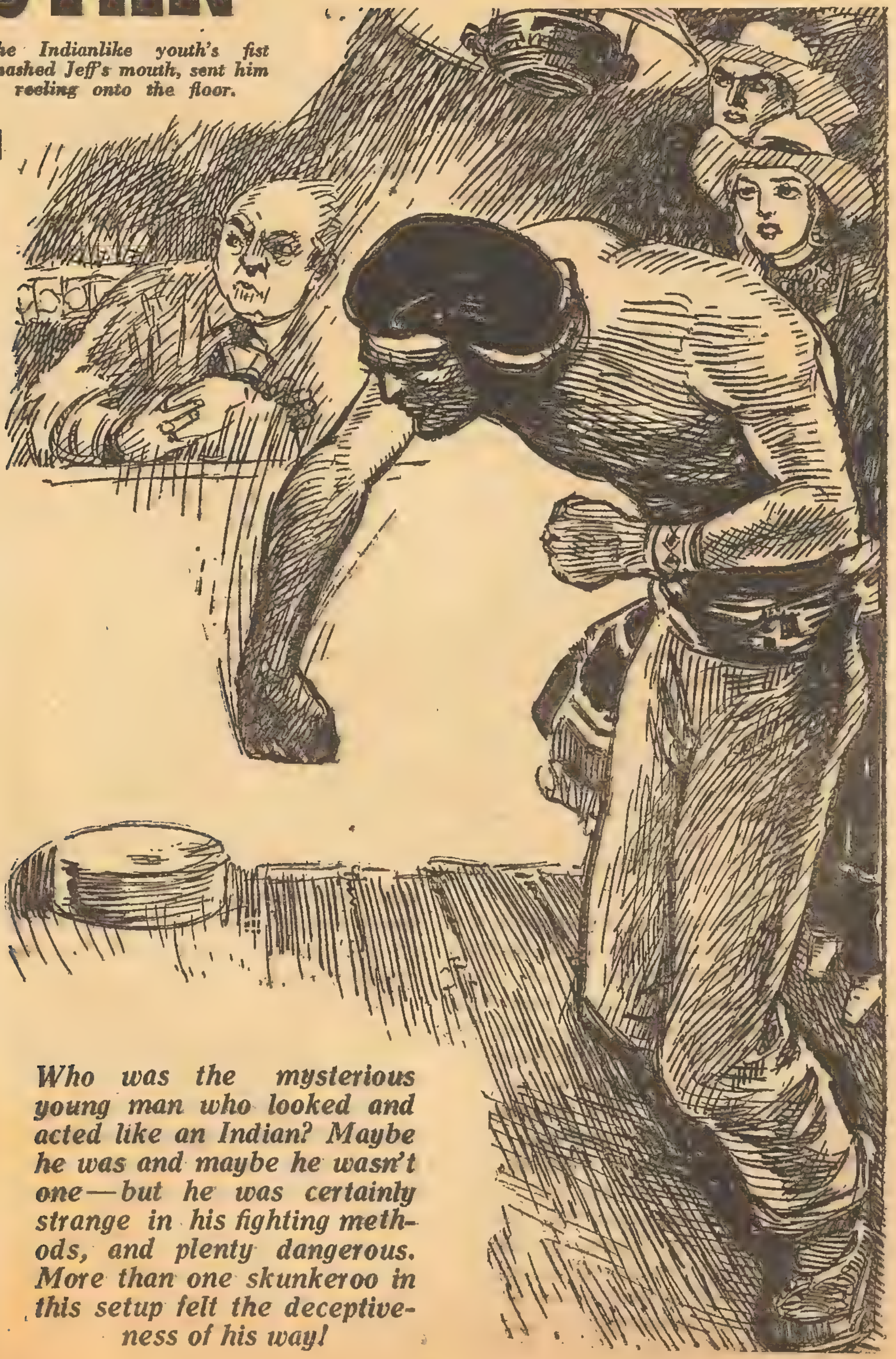
The paint horse, which the elderly Indian bestrode, stood spray-legged, dejected with drooping head, while the bay was restless, its head upflung, muzzle and ears pointed at the younger man, as his nimble fingers knotted the rawhide reins. It nickered when the two men turned away, and its master glanced back, raising a sinewy arm to quiet it.

The elder of the two wore a blanket of the Navahoes, draping once-powerful

# STAR

## By BRANCH CARTER

*The Indianlike youth's fist smashed Jeff's mouth, sent him reeling onto the floor.*



*Who was the mysterious young man who looked and acted like an Indian? Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't one—but he was certainly strange in his fighting methods, and plenty dangerous. More than one skunkeroo in this setup felt the deceptiveness of his way!*

shoulders, its tip dragging to the ground but disclosing moccasins and the bottoms of ragged trousers. Beyond the warrior age, he walked with slumping step and bowed frame, but his black, beady eyes shot keen glances from side to side and ahead as they progressed. Without indication of fear, he appeared defensively wary. If he carried weapons, the blanket concealed them.

His companion presented strange and striking contrast. Possibly twenty, the young fellow was as erect and springy as a sapling. He too wore moccasins and trousers but both were relatively clean and in good condition. A fringed scarf bound his lean waist. Above it his mahogany torso was bare and with a width of shoulders and depth of chest uncommon with any tribe. Heavy muscles backed his shoulders and were packed firmly on his smooth chest. The flat stomach was ridged. But even more arresting was the way the youth carried himself; head erect, assured, without conscious pride and without belligerence; look, straightforward, cool without antagonism. To paraphrase the slogan of the Lone Star State, his poise and attitude were a silent warning: *Don't step on me, brother.* And that was the same as a chip on the shoulder of an Indian youth. Against his right thigh was the sheath of a broad-bladed knife, its bone hilt protruding.

Enos Jackson came plodding along the dirt sidewalk toward the pair. Jackson had brought his profession of law, along with a weak lung, from away back East to try to make out with both on this far frontier. If not the most intelligent he was at least the best-educated man in Slocum, and he took keen interest in every phase of his surroundings.

With bent head, unwarned by the silent, moccasined tread, his first awareness of the strangers came with sight of the striding legs. He glanced up and met the straight look of the youth's dark grey eyes that seemed to bore through him, appraise him and go on beyond. Jackson's head turned on his neck as on a pivot; then he stopped, wheeling around on his walking stick, frowning after the younger man. Whatever had been his immediate destination, he changed his mind and followed. Jackson had left Fletcher Ormsby, owner of the X Bar O, wrangling over some complaint of the rancher's with Sheriff Tim Fowler, in the Gold Strike Saloon and he turned in there now.

BOTH men were still elbowing the bar, fiddling with their glasses but evidently more interested in their discussion. Ormsby was rangy, with broad, lean shoulders, a sweeping brown mustache and pleasant eyes now creased with a worried frown. The sheriff was big and rugged with surprisingly keen, dark eyes.

"C'mon over here, Enos," the sheriff called in his bull voice, as the lawyer appeared. "Dunno what brought you back so suddent," he added, "lessen it's an onrighteous cravin' for likker."

"Yeah, how come?" the rancher seconded. "Thought you was goin' to fix up them papers for me."

"Tell you later. What's biting you two buzzards now?"

"Been meanin' to ask you for right some time," the sheriff drawled, "what you found out 'bout them rip-roarin' rights up at th' county seat."

"Let's call 'em *riparian* rights, Tim."

"I don't give a fuss in hell what you call 'em!" Sheriff Tim roared. "What I wants to know is does Fletch stand solid on his springs section an' the water comin' outa there?"

The lawyer glanced keenly at his rancher friend.

"Somebody beginning to press you, Fletcher?"

"Kinder—in one way or 'nother, Enos." Fletcher Ormsby shifted his position and took a long swallow of his neglected drink, which did not escape the lawyer's notice.

"You lawyer fellers," Sheriff Tim bulled in, "are th' damnfiredest cusses. Ask you a plain question an' you gee an' haw all over the road, like you want to keep th' answer secret."

"You wouldn't be holding out anything on me, huh?" Enos asked calmly.

The sheriff glanced at Ormsby, then gave attention to his own drink.

"Let me see," Enos prodded. "Niles Purdy's big spread's to the south of the X Bar O, and this side of the ridge water kind of runs to the south. I believe I've heard that Niles's been having a pretty dry summer on his range."

Tim Fowler looked again at the rancher.

"Yeah," he said gruffly. "Niles is pressin' Fletch 'bout holdin' back the stream. Niles mebbe won't do nothin' but I don't aim to give that gun-slingin' foreman of his, Buck Ailer, too much rope. An' if 'twern't for Fletch's gal Jean int'rested in straightenin' young Jeff Purdy out, I'd scruff his horns 'fore he got to usin' 'em."

"There's nothin' mean 'bout Jeff," Fletcher Ormsby said quietly.

"Mebbe an' mebbe not. But he's a reckless son, always tryin' to make out how tough he is. If he didn't have an eye for Jean, I reckon Buck Ailer'd have no trouble settin' him up to something. And if I was Jean an' sot on doin' any missionarian', I'd right sooner pick me an Injun than young Jeff Purdy howsomever."

"Huh?" Enos glanced up quickly. "That reminds me," he began, but big Tim Fowler was intent on his own trail.

"That ain't all that's worryin' Fletch. Somebody's been spokin' his beef. Scattered all over hell-an'-git-out. Fletch reckon's more'n a thousand head's been driv into the coolies an' chaparral over beyond them foothills."

"Rustling?"

"Danged fool way to go 'bout rustlin', less'n somebody's aimin' to git 'em where they can pick off a small bunch at a time. I ain't thought o' that; have you, Fletch?"

"Don't sound reasonable," Ormsby said.

"Hmm," Enos Jackson remarked. "Aren't they moving the Indians in a wide section into the big reservation, Tim?"

"Sure are. But they're mostly north o' the Orisco. I ain't seen nary a redskin for a coupla moons."

"Well, I just saw two—or one, anyway. I'm not so sure about the second one. There seemed to be a marked ethnological difference. I'll have to make sure of that."

"Wall, now, them high-soundin' words don't mean nothin' to me, Enos. But if there's Injuns around, that might be your answer, Fletch. I'll go catch up these two you saw, Enos, an' make palaver."

"You wait a minute, Tim, and I'll go with you. Right now I'm tired of standing and feel unaccountably thirsty. Bring another glass and the bottle to the table there and I'll explain those rights."

MEANWHILE, the two objects of the lawyer's interest had moved steadily down the street until they came to a less reputable saloon than the Gold Strike. There, the old Indian mumbled a word about tobacco and entered while his companion strode on to the general store, a few doors beyond. As he stepped silently in, his glance took note of the interior without appearing to do so. As a matter of fact, the few occupants were not immediately aware of his presence.

Bald-headed, round-bodied Pete Lacy was wrapping up some purchases for one of Fletcher Ormsby's punchers who was leaning against the counter, gaze fixed on the toes of his crossed boots and with the air that he wasn't hearing a word of the somewhat heated conversation being carried on by Jean Ormsby and young Jeff Purdy, who were facing each other not more than six feet from him.

Young Purdy's features carried an accurate confirmation of the sheriff's description. The eyes were shifty and reckless; the mouth sensuous and brutal. At the moment his face was flushed a brighter red than his tan, either from drink or rising anger, making livid the scar high on cheekbone. Every young and unattached rider within a county loop was keenly aware of Jean Ormsby's beauty and charm and so far unsuccessful in doing anything about it. Of them all, Jeff Purdy alone misunderstood the serious girl's interest in him and con-

fident that he had the inside track he was showing resentment at the frank advice she was now giving him.

The X Bar O puncher was both young and unattached, with a keen devotion to his boss' daughter. And there was nothing wrong with his hearing. About to butt in, it occurred to him that a good excuse would better please Jean although he had no such regard for Purdy's opinion. He turned to see how Bald Pete was making out with his wrapping and his astonished gaze fell on the bronzed figure that had materialized apparently from nowhere and was standing stolidly awaiting the storekeeper's attention.

Some unconscious exclamation may have escaped the rider, for young Purdy glanced quickly at him, then followed the direction of his frozen look. Jean also looked and her brown eyes opened wide in frank admiration as she continued to study the quietly erect figure and clean-cut countenance of the strange youth.

Jeff Purdy, however, did not share the girl's admiration. He saw only an object on which he could vent the anger seething within him, which went clear over the boiling point as he caught Jean's look. He strode forward.

"Get the hell outa here," he said coarsely. "I don't want no stinking Injun 'round me," and to give emphasis to the command he shoved hard against the youth's shoulder. Oddly it didn't give. Instead Jeff himself was forced a little back by the strength of his push, as if he had shoved against a wall.

ANGERED beyond all reason, Jeff swung a fist at the stolid face. It encountered nothing but air, but something far more solid than air smashed Jeff's mouth and sent him reeling until his shoulders met the floor. Yelling an oath, quite unsuited to Jean's ears, he scrambled to his feet, hand reaching for his heavy pistol. The fingers clutched only leather. Jeff looked down at the empty holster, then at the floor near his feet and finally at his pistol held loosely in the youth's left hand. His mouth opened in incredulous amazement, then closed on a blistering snarl.

"Lemme have your gun, Lee," he demanded of the X Bar O man.

"Don't you do it, Lee," Jean countered quickly.

"I ain't the least idee of doin' no such thing," Lee said.

"Damn you," Jeff yelled. "Gimme that gun or I'll take it from you!" He took a step toward the puncher.

"If you take anything," Lee said calmly, "you'll take what's inside it. It's your own danged fault, pickin' on a peaceable galoot, an' you got exactly what you was aimin' to give."

"That's right, Jeff," Jean echoed. She took another glance at the youth's placid, unexpressionless face and his indifferent attitude. "He didn't do you any harm and I'm sure he won't do any with that pistol unless you force him to it."

Apparently Jeff didn't agree, at least with part of the girl's statement. He raised his hand to his mouth and glared at the blood that came away with his fingers. Scowling once at Lee but ignoring both Jean and the bronzed stranger, he started toward the door.

"I'll get me a gun," he mumbled. "Then we'll see about it."

The sharp tone in Lee's voice stopped him:

"Just a minute, Purdy. You ain't fit to come 'fore no woman, let alone Miss Jean. And that's whatever. But I'm servin' notice I'm roddin' this Injun personal until he's outa town. An' you can think of that if you're honin' to do any shootin'."

Jeff Purdy growled something and went out.

Both Lee and Jean were regarding the strange youth with frank curiosity, and now, heretofore unnoticed by the others, Pete's bald head rose above the counter, like a full moon rising over the mesa. He stared, open-mouthed.

"What're you anyway, an' where you come from?" Lee asked, pleasantly.

There was no verbal reply nor the least indication that the words were understood, but the young fellow stepped toward the cowboy and laid Purdy's pistol on the counter beside him. His lips were firm pressed, yet there was

something like a smile in the deep gray eyes as he looked at Lee. The cowboy nodded and grinned as he stuck the weapon into his waistband.

"I savvy," Lee said.

"I've never known anything like it," Jean murmured. "He did absolutely nothing to defend himself."

*"Morning Star," he said softly and with guttural.*

"Yep, an' how. Migawd, what a wallop! Funny thing too. Never yet knowed an Injun to use his hands for fists."

"That's what I've been wondering. He's got the coloring, and there's his long black hair; but his head and face, and the way he carries himself. I don't believe he *is* Indian—not all Indian anyway."

The silent object of their discussion was facing Bald Pete, who shifted his fascinated stare finally from the muscle-packed torso and bethought himself of the business at hand.

"Yore stuff's ready, Lee," he called. "Makes up to five dollars and eighty cents."

WHILE the cowboy was making payment, the youth turned deliberately and looked at Jean—a steady, unflinching gaze. She smiled at him but could see no response in eyes or straight lips; yet for a long time she could not get from her mind the unfathomable

look in the dark-gray eyes that neither offended nor questioned. Presently she flushed slightly at the prolonged look and, with a little nod, turned her own glance away.

"I'm meeting father at the restaurant, Lee," she said. "I have to tell him about the way Jeff acted. Jeff was angry with me, too, and father won't like that. You'd better come and join us."

"Soon's as I tend to one or two things. Tell Fletch he needn't worry none about Jeff, unless Buck Ailer's in town, an' I don't think he is."

Jean turned again to the youth. She nodded her head and, although feeling its futility, said: "Goodbye."

For the first time his straight lips parted.

"Morning Star," he said softly but clearly and without the slightest trace of guttural.

Recalling suddenly the remarks she had made, Jean hurried out in somewhat embarrassed bewilderment.

Lee took his packages to the hitchrail at one side of the town's best restaurant and distributed them between the saddlebags of his own and Ormsby's mounts. Then instead of joining Jean inside, he sauntered a short way along the dusty street and hunkered in the shade of a false-front building.

The young stranger bought heavily of flour, dried beans and other articles of food, signifying his wishes by pointing or a brief word in the jargon of the plains, but he uttered no further word in English against Pete's rumbling talk. When it came to payment, he took gold dust from a neat deerskin pouch concealed under the trouser band, and this caused Pete's eyes to pop further, not alone at the dust but also at the youth's knowledge of its trade value.

Well-laden, his swinging walk showing nothing of the considerable weight he carried on one shoulder and in both hands, he passed Lee without sign of recognition, loaded his stuff onto the pack animal and swiftly threw a hitch over the worn blanket that covered all. The old Indian was nowhere in sight.

Retracing his steps, the youth entered the cheap saloon where his companion had earlier gone.

At his coming complete silence reigned for a brief moment over the sordid place.

A still, blanketed form lay on the floor, head against the wood, its dark forehead showing the darker stain of blood. The youth saw this, took in the movement of the chest, then his eyes swept the room. Two men were standing against the bar; one of them was a big, hulking fellow, with pushed-back sombrero showing more clearly his heavy, sullen features. His mouth split in a yellow-toothed grin as he met the youth's steady look.

"Yeah, yeah," he growled. "If you're askin' for it, I'll give you some of the same, young buck. I jest don't like Injuns."

The young man turned, stooped and lifted easily the big Indian over a shoulder. He started for the door and the man at the bar leered after him.

"Lucky for you, you got sense, yellerbelly."

There was no reply. Trotting up the street again, feeling his burden beginning to squirm, the young man reached the tethered horses and set the old Indian on his feet, supporting him as he swayed unsteadily. The elder man, quickly regaining consciousness, fumbled a hand from under the blanket and produced a flat bottle to which his fingers had tenaciously clung. His companion took it from him, uncorked it and held the flask to his lips for a long swallow, then smashed the bottle against the rail, paying no heed to the guttural protests. Once more he lifted the old one and set him astride his pony. Fastening the lead rope to the old man's belt, the younger one untied the reins of the paint, placed them in the old man's grasp and slapped the animal's rump.

For a few moments the young one watched the old one go, his own gaze inscrutable. The tall form of the old Indian, blanketed from head to knees, was bent low, long legs dangling, feet swinging, the picture of complete and

hopeless indifference to goal and fate; one of the most desolate sights on the broad prairies. Then the youth turned and sped swiftly back.

## CHAPTER II

### *Rage For Revenge*

DURING this while, Lee, the Ormsby puncher, showed that he was not without imagination. He didn't know what had happened in the cheap saloon, and he didn't need to. He'd seen trouble pass him in a limp form and in the hard, straight-ahead look of fearless gray eyes, and he didn't wait for the young man's return. Snuffing out his smoke, Lee hied himself in search of Sheriff Tim Fowler and he found him, still absorbed with Enos Jackson and Fletcher Ormsby, just after the Indianlike youth was paying his second call at the disreputable saloon.

An angry roar greeted his entrance as the hulking bully, further primed with rotgut whiskey, caught sight of him and saw that the steady, accusing look was for him alone.

"Cut it out, Steve," the small man beside him cautioned. "You've had your fun, an' there's a law agin killin' too many Injuns."

"The hell with that!" Steve bellowed. "No yeller-bellied, stinkin' Injun's goin' to stare me in the face like that."

The young man was standing motionless, arms at his sides, nothing seemingly vital about him except the flaming hate in his unwavering gaze. Steve launched himself from the bar and swung a hamlike fist—and with the same lack of success which Jeff Purdy had experienced a short while earlier. And like Jeff again, Steve was hurled backward by a crashing blow in his sullen face. He staggered but he didn't go down; then hammerlike blows crushed his nose, split his lips and drove him until his back buckled against the bar edge. Then the youth sprang backward, poised motionless again.

At that moment, Sheriff Tim hit the batwings and opened his mouth to yell his command.

But Steve already had his gun out and the sheriff's bellow was lost in the crashing roar. In the last instant, the youth had slid to his right; then a thin shaft of light shot through the eddying smoke. Big Steve gave a great gasp and his heavy body thudded to the floor with the hilt of a sheath-knife projecting from his chest.

"Hold it, ever'body!" Sheriff Tim thundered, and strode forward, big Peacemaker in hand. Lee Ford followed him and Enos Jackson peered around Lee's shoulder. No one else moved; that is, no one but the youth. Indifferent to the sheriff's order, he slid forward, drew the reeking blade, calmly wiped it on the dead man's shirt and returned it to its sheath. And a little irrepressible shiver touched more than one of the tough lads at the cold callousness of the act.

"Waal, I'll be hornswoggled damned," Big Tim muttered as the young man calmly faced him. "Hey, Enos; this your spec'men?"

"Exactly," the lawyer replied. "And I want to talk with him."

"You got to wait till I hold court on this here proceedin'. Now you fellers"—Big Tim waved the long barrel of the Peacemaker indiscriminately—"I seen what I seen an' know all about that Steve feller did his draw when the Injun lad weren't doin' nothing. So, what started it? You, Dominique," he addressed the swarthy barkeeper, "you anyways wasn't drunk and you must've seed it all. I want the plumb truth of it, an' not a danged thing *but* the truth."

Dominique wiped his hands, drew the cloth once over his greasy face, adding more dirt to each, peered surreptitiously over the bar to make sure that he would not be contradicted by the still form lying there, then gave a fairly credible account of the fracas. Steve, he said, was right onery, account of something Dominique didn't know, and when the old Indian, after smoking a while, sidled up by Steve at the bar and asked for whiskey, he having already purchased a pint . . . why, Steve up and knocked him half across the room and when he came tottering back, pistol-whupped him.

The young Injun, Dominique went on,

lugged the old one out and when he came back, standing there and boring Steve with a stare of El Diablo—Dominique crossed himself, with the cloth flapping—Steve jumped him and got slammed back against the bar. "I no see—"

"Aw right," Sheriff Tim cut him off. "I got her from there. Case closed; court dismissed. C'mon, Enos, an' you, Quick-with-the-Steel or howsomever they call you, you come along with us. You too, Lee."

It should be noted that Tim let the others precede him and that the Peacemaker was in his hand and not in its holster until they had gone some paces beyond the saloon's doors.

ENOS JACKSON declared, "You're no Indian."

They were in the sheriff's office which the four crowded to its capacity. Lee Ford had related the run-in with Jeff Purdy and given his opinion of the youth. He had told also of the two spoken English words.

"Know who you are?" Enos persisted, when he received no response. "Know what your name is?"

The young man glanced at Lee who nodded, then grinned. It was something to be called on to recommend the town's lawyer. Big Tim caught it too and guffawed.

"He call me John David." The words were clearly spoken but slow in their utterance as if drawn from memory with difficulty.

"Who?" Enos demanded. "Who called you John David?"

"One good white man." He tapped his chest. "All time with Indian. I know—"

"Nothing else?" Enos supplied.

"Nothing else. He come . . . came" —the lawyer's eyes sparkled at the correction—"far-off. He sick. I care." He shook his head. "Not let Indian kill." He stopped and again looked questioningly at Lee.

Lee grinned. "Go on, pard; you're doin' fine."

From another pouch at his belt, the youth drew a folded and yellow paper. He handed it to Enos and the lawyer opened it with eager fingers, frowned over it, then read aloud:

*"To any honest white man:— In God's name I beg you give the bearer of this a chance to know the true civilization. As a minister of the gospel I assure his character is of the best. He doesn't know his past and I could not discover it. Chance at first and later outrages of white men have kept him solely with the Indians. I have taught him some English and what I could of God. He saved my life and will be with me to the end. His name may be John David—something. I can't make it out. I commend his guidance to your conscience and you may be sure of reward.*

*Signed, John Lowther."*

Enos tapped the paper.

"How did he know you were John David?" He repeated the question more slowly.

From the same pouch, the youth drew a ring. It was a signet ring with what appeared to be a scroll. He pointed to the inside of the band and Enos took out his glasses, wiped them carefully and squinted.

"John David, yep. The rest illegible. Hmm." The lawyer fitted the ring to his largest finger. "Man's. That tells us something. Where did you get it?"

"Old Indian woman. Chief's mother—before she die."

"Most interesting case since I came West," Enos mumbled. "By George, I'll send for a Burke's Peerage. It might—"

"The point seems to be," the sheriff cut in dryly, "not so much who this feller is but what we're goin' to do about him. That Steve had some mighty mean friends."

Lee was struck by a belated thought. He drew the second pistol from his waistband and passed it to Big Tim.

"He took that off Jeff Purdy. I dunno *how*—an' neither did Jeff. But if Jeff gets hisself another six-gun he sure as hell is goin' to blast him, especially if I ain't handy an' this bucko sticks around here."

"I'll tell you," Enos cut in sharply. "We figured, Tim, that Ormsby's beef

*Sheriff Tim strode over, slashed the gun across Ailer's head and dumped him into the dust.*

was being shoved around either by roving Indians or—by somebody else. I'll bet John David could get to the truth of it like no one else."

Big Tim took his feet off the desk and sat erect.

"Now I reckon you're talkin', Enos. Ridin' for Fletch, huh?" He suddenly slapped his thigh and let out a bellow of a laugh. "An' he'd get his civilizin' too. Remember what I said about Jean missionarian', Enos? C'mon; le's go see 'em."

SHERIFF TIM turned back from the door and looked hard at John David.

"You know how to handle one of these here things?" the lawman queried, tapping the butt of the Peacemaker.

The youth nodded briefly. Tim stepped back to his desk, drew out a Colt .44, twirled the empty cylinder, then filled it with cartridges. He found a belt studded with similar bullets, and with holster black and shiny from age and much use. Its last notch held it on John's waist.

"Waal, by gum," Tim rumbled. "So I was like that, huh, when I was the lad's age."

"What's on your mind?" Enos asked a little sharply.

"I reckon 'tain't agin th' law to give a feller a chance to defend his life." Tim laughed. "Mebbe it's my conscience workin', like Preacher Lowther says. Hell, I didn't know I had one no more." He turned his head toward John. "Lemme see if you can get that hawleg out, somethin' like this," making his words understandable by Tim's old redoubtable draw. He was in the act of shoving the Peacemaker back when he found himself looking into the bore of the loaned .44. Tim gazed around at Enos and Lee Ford in awe.

"You haven't answered my question, Tim," Enos snapped.

"Waal, back there in Dominique's there was a feller jest pullin' down on John when I yelled for law an' order. An' right now they's a sizeable crowd front of Dominique's almighty int'rested thisaway. I seen Jeff Purdy in the door an' kinda think that was Buck Ailer alongside him. Le's go."

Dominique's cheap hangout was across the road both from the sheriff's office and the restaurant which was still farther toward the north end of the settlement; but that roadway was only sixty feet wide from shack to shack and before the saloon were gathered a half dozen or more of the town's worst citizens, their coarse faces flushed with liquor. In the doorway stood Jeff Purdy, his lips puffed and swollen, a leer on his face, and beside him, proof of Tim's keen sight, was the Circle P foreman, Buck Ailer. Trouble was plainly in the making.

Enos Jackson plodded on ahead, making talk with John David to keep him on his left and away from the cross-street bunch. Nothing untoward happened until the four were a little past the scowling crowd, who had not yet worked themselves to a pitch of defying Tim's and his Peacemaker's authority. Then Buck Ailer shoved in his plugged nickel.

"Hey, Fowler," he called sarcastically. "You takin' that Injun to the hoosegow?"

"Waal, now, Buck," Tim drawled, "you aimin' to make anything out of it?" And under his breath the sheriff added: "Keep movin', fellers."

Buck stepped from the doorway, nudging a man as he moved a little to one side. "Bein' a citizen," he said loudly, "I got a right to see a murderer hung."

Tim turned his head as he continued his slow gait. He'd seen Buck Ailer's every motion. He'd also noted that Jeff Purdy had disappeared from sight.

"Watch that leetle winder, Lee," the lawman said low. Then to Ailer: "Mebbe if you stick around where you are now, Buck, you can see all you want of it. An' if you go to liftin' that iron you can stretch hemp yoreself—less'n I save the county the job."

But Ailer's words had had their effect. One man yelled: "We want that Injun killer!" Others took up the cry, and the bunch began to stir. At that moment a pistol or rifle barrel appeared in the small window opening at the right of the door. Lee's shot came possibly an instant before it blazed and its slug barely raised a welt on John David's bronzed shoulder, while tinkling glass told that Lee's hasty shot had been too high.

Instantly the crowd dashed headlong for the saloon door, jamming it in their haste and leaving Buck Ailer at one side with Tim's big six-gun leveled on him.

"You root there, Ailer!" the sheriff roared, as he and Lee stepped backward ready, if necessary, to gain the protection of the narrow alley abreast of them.

JOHN DAVID had whirled at the sound of the double shots, his keen eyes taking in every phase of the swift drama. Suddenly, he turned and sped like an antelope up the dusty street, apparently in flight. Men had come from shop and saloon in both directions from the storm center. Farther along, Fletcher Ormsby and Jean rushed from the restaurant.

John passed them at full speed and they gazed after him in wonder.

Buck Ailer set up a derisive yell.

"There goes yore pris'ner, Fowler! You're a hell of a sheriff."

Tim, too, was staring after the flying figure as if in disbelief. Then the young man turned the corner of the wrecked shack, and at once the crash of a pistol came from that direction. Another report followed. A couple of moments later, a horseman appeared, dashing into the roadway, looking backward, smoking pistol in hand. He raised his arm and fired again, and a second horseman appeared behind him, both pounding down the dusty way at full run.

And the second rider was John David, astride the mettlesome bay, demonstrating immediately its superior speed.

Up and down the street, people stood frozen, staring, waiting for the impending tragedy, for the man in the lead had his gun swinging freely, taking his time for a sure shot, grinning derisively as he saw his pursuer empty-handed. Big Tim Fowler started forward, then hesitated as his keen eyes picked out the Circle P on the flank of the leading animal.

Now they were nearing Dominique's doorway, crowded with tough, excited faces, and the bay was almost to the leader's flank. Too close to miss, the Circle P rider raised his arm again. With the report, John David fell over sidewise, and above the crash and the delighted yells from Dominique's doorway, Tim Fowler heard Jean Ormsby's shrill scream. Then Tim was yelling and unaware of it.

John didn't go to the ground. One leg over the bay's withers, his right hand came from under the running horse's neck. Flame burst from John's .44 and the Circle P puncher, throwing his hands high, slumped and thudded into the dust. John came back up to his seat and sped past.

Then the Peacemaker in Big Tim's hand roared and the half-drawn gun from Buck Ailer's holster jumped from his grasp and Ailer waved his bruised fingers in the air. Tim strode over, slashed the heavy barrel on Ailer's head and dumped him into the dust, then turned the gun onto the jammed doorway.

The effect was immediate, the spot being vacated as if by magic. Tim followed and the crowd spilled out the back door like rats in flight.

When Tim emerged, John David was quietly sitting his horse with Enos and Lee Ford beside him.

"You, Lee, git this hellion outa town," the sheriff growled, "before he don't leave nobody in it." But the look he gave the youth told better what the lawman thought about it.

"You don't like it, huh?" Lee asked, looking at the Purdy Circle P horse which had been ridden by the now-dead puncher.

"Niles Purdy ain't goin' to like it," the sheriff said. "An' most like he'll believe what young Jeff and Ailer git to tellin' him. You git the straight on what's doin' on the X Bar O soon's you can, an' I'm countin' on this feller with his Comanche tricks to show you."

FLETCHER ORMSBY, with Jean a little behind him, came up to them. The rancher was smiling but his expression changed quickly when Sheriff Tim Fowler indicated the still-recumbent Buck Ailer with a jerk of his grizzly head, then pointed to the Circle P horse standing near the dead puncher.

"That's two kind of trouble, Fletch," Tim rumbled. "Third is that this young feller made a fool o' Jeff in front of Jean an' smashed Jeff's purty face, an' I got a fair idea it was Jeff who tried to bushwhack John David here, outa that there winder, but Lee cuts down on Jeff. All this is goin' to tie onto Niles Purdy's tail like a bunch o' cans to a cur dog. You sorter get the idea, Fletch?"

The worried look returned to the rancher's face.

"What was Buck Ailer up to in this?" he asked. "I was watchin' this feller do his ridin'."

"Buck started them hooligans to raisin' hell, an' I reckon he sent his now-dead puncher there to steal John's hoss. When John dumped the feller, Buck was aimin' to shoot John in th' back. You know

Buck. He ain't goin' to stop at that."

Rancher Ormsby glanced at John David, who was quietly watching and listening.

"What's you idea, Tim?" Ormsby asked.

"Hell, Fletch, you don't need no mind-reader to tell you that. Forgot what you come in to tell me this mornin'? This-all 'll give 'em an excuse to finish it."

"Thought we kinda figgered it might be Injuns," Ormsby said hesitantly.

"That's what John here's goin' out to show you."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Me an' Enos 've already put him on your payroll."

"Fletcher," the lawyer spoke for the first time, "I'm not only advising you but I'm asking you to do as Tim says."

"He's sure enough a rider." Ormsby's glance swept his daughter briefly. "But ain't he what you might call the center o' trouble?"

Jean faced her parent with blazing eyes.

"Father!" she said, and apparently the single word and its intonation were enough.

"Aw right, aw right," Ormsby said hastily. His expression brightened. "Better get after it right away, Lee. You an' him take a pasear over beyond them foothills. See if you can find sign." He turned to the still-silent youth. "I'll pay forty an' keep, John."

"Perhaps," Jean said reasonably, "we ought to ask him if he wants to go."

"Look, John," the lawyer spoke slowly. "I want to keep the ring and Lowther's letter a little while." The lad nodded. The lawyer continued: "Now I want you to go with these people, to live with them. They are the kind John Lowther meant."

Once more, John glanced at Lee Ford and the cowboy nodded.

"I go," John said. "I don't want money. I have much." He tapped his waist.

"Waal, bigod," Big Tim rumbled, watching John and the cowboy making their way toward Lee's mount. "An' here we was tryin' to shove him down your throat, Fletch, an' you git him for nothin'."

"Oh, father will pay him regular wages," Jean said. "Have you found out what he is?" she asked Enos.

"There is only one thing I'm sure of now," the lawyer answered. "He's clean white all the way through. But I'm going to find his identity if humanly possible. Let's go have a bite and I'll tell you about it. Coming, Tim?"

"With this mess to clear up?" the sheriff said gloomily. He strode over to Buck Ailer, who was showing signs of returning consciousness.

And from the concealment of a dark window, Jeff Purdy watched the group separating, with perfect understanding and with a murderous rage in his heart, that concerned itself only with revenge.

## CHAPTER III

### *Rampaging Rancher*

FROM wide sections the Indians were streaming toward the lands set apart as their own by the Great White Father, and to make certain that the reluctant ones should take advantage of this generosity, blue-clad soldiers were their frequent escort. Beyond the low range of hills where the terrain was split by coolies and gullies choked with thorn, and islands of chaparral, John David and Lee Ford sat their mounts and for a few moments watched a long line of these migrants far distant on the piedmount plain.

Lee had explained the moving and dispersal of part of the X Bar O beef and spoken of the possibility of Indian marauders. They'd seen some cattle on their way through the hills but Lee had sworn at thought of the strenuous work that would be required to comb them out of their hiding places in this broken country. As a matter of fact, until that work was done, they couldn't be sure that all the missing thousand cattle had been driven here.

John turned from a prolonged study of the plain before him, then shook his head.

"No Indian pass here," he said in his studied English. "Better go where they came from."

Lee led him back to the great basin which was the Ormsby range and from whose far upper end the beef had been missed. This was the springs section to which Sheriff Tim had referred. A mile from the source Fletcher Ormsby had thrown up a low dam providing a wide and shallow pond that even in midsummer held some water. Below the dam the stream was a mere trickle and without overflow was dry. The home ranch was halfway down the basin where other springs afforded sufficient water for home use and fed a moderate amount to the stream bed, and five miles below that, where the foothills fringing the basin drew together, Ormsby had made another but much smaller pond. This gap provided the natural boundary between the Ormsby and Purdy spreads, the latter running off to the southeast. Twenty miles due west of the Ormsby basin was the little town of Slocum.

Lee pointed out all this together with his opinion of the Purdy outfit and in particular young Jeff and Buck Ailer, whom he identified as John's antagonists back in town. Then the Indian-bred youth spent an hour searching for sign over the wide basin, once dashing clear to the edge of the nearside foothills, then skirting them northward until he headed back in the opposite direction. Far out on the basin, which also narrowed at this end, Lee saw him dismount and, bending low, walk a short distance angling southward. Then he returned and, after looking over the ground again, mounted quickly and sped off to disappear in the low hills to the northwest.

Lee built and smoked four cigarettes until he saw horse and rider emerge and take a straight line toward him.

"Five white men, two Indian ponies drive," John said tersely. "White men go there." He swept his arm toward the south.

"What you find out yonder?" Lee asked when the youth did not continue.

In his limited vocabulary John explained that the part of the tribe, with whom he had lived since babyhood and before the beginning of his memory, came from the far southwest, passing close on the north of the settlement on their way to the reservation. It was at that point he had taken his leave of them.

"I do not think the two ponies from them," John added and went on to say that other Indians had crossed their trail or been met on the long trek.

LEE reported all this to Fletcher Ormsby on their return to headquarters and the rancher flushed with anger.

"Come mornin'," he declared, "we'll git John to trail them five to where they went. An' if it's to Purdy's, we'll iron

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this out. We'll take the whole danged crew an' pull out before daylight. I reckon the Injuns've gone an' we'll let 'em go."

"John says you better put some men on the cattle tonight," Lee told him. "I noticed they was driftin' north where the missin' head left the range."

"You tell off Juke Short an' Peters. Tell 'em to take a snack for breakfast an' jine us when we come."

Shortly afterward the ranch house was darkened and quiet reigned over the place. Several of the riders had spent the better part of the day in combing for the missing beef and were drowning their irritation in deep slumber. Some time between midnight and dawn, however, every man jack about the home ranch was hurrahed from his sleep by a man shouting in the dooryard.

Tumbling out, they found Juke Short swaying in his saddle and holding to a bleeding arm. His story was short and to the point. Their first intimation of trouble had come with the movement of the cattle. Then Peters, who was a short distance ahead of Juke, opened fire. Juke rode up to join him and several rifles opened on both, downing Peters and getting Juke in the arm. He had come back pronto for help.

Saddles were torn from peg and post, horses roped out, six-guns buckled on and rifles showed into boots. Jean Ormsby, dressed for the trail, wanted to join them but Ormsby forbade that, and soon she was left alone with only the old Chinese cook about the premises.

Juke Short, with his wounded arm bound up, led them and they came to the body of Peters before they had sign of the cattle. The cowboy was dead from a bullet through the chest.

They pushed on. Hot for revenge, they were not silent in their headlong rush and soon a rifle blazed from a quarter mile to the north and the purr of a slug whistled overhead before the report reached them. That gave both the signal and the direction and at once all hell was popping loose.

A half dozen rifles crashed in return; two more answered from up ahead, a third from well off to their left.

"Don't git to shootin' yoreselves," Fletch Ormsby yelled, as spurs were plunged into heaving flanks.

There was one thing about Ormsby of which perhaps Sheriff Tim alone was aware, for it was a long time since Fletch had been on the prod. Quiet and retiring, slow to anger, folks had never tagged him as a fighting man, rather as a man who could be pushed over by a show of force. And Niles Purdy, his nearest neighbor, was among those who held this opinion. But Tim knew him as a cold, fearless hellion when once aroused and the iron control he had held on himself since the early days of reckless youth was broken.

The battle in the darkness raged north, then west, and spread all over that end of the basin. The shots of course were largely at random and mostly aimed in the general direction of the elusive gunflashes, and judging the number of them it was very soon evident to both sides that the X Bar O crew well outnumbered the marauders.

Then it became a running fight toward the off-side foothills, but it was only when the Ormsby riders got near enough for six-gun play that they could cut down the enemy as they did on two occasions before the fugitives were lost in the hills and gunfire ceased.

FLETCHER ORMSBY, who had pushed into the cover with blazing gun until convinced that further pursuit was futile, came back and gathered his men. He learned of the two men downed and gave orders to catch their two straying horses.

"Stay on it till daylight if you have to," he added grimly. "I want to read the iron on' em 'fore we do the next shootin'."

He found Lee beside him as they started back.

"There ain't any sense to this, Lee," the rancher said more gruffly than his usually pleasant tone. "They was pushin'

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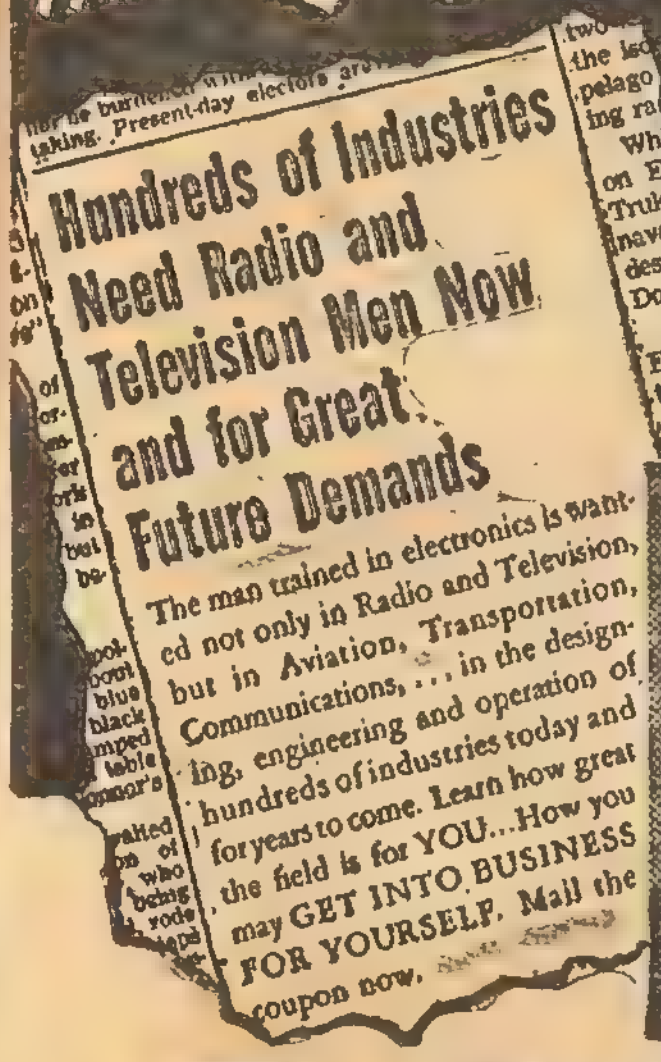
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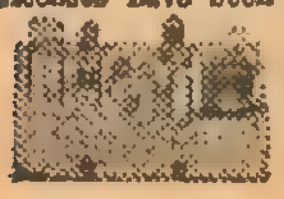

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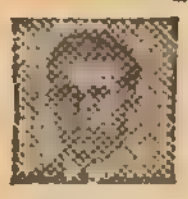

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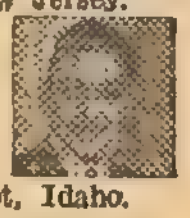

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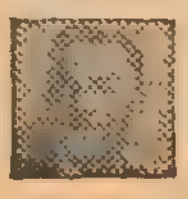

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north an' they couldn't have got nowhere with the critters up there."

"Mebbe somebody wants to rile us up," Lee commented. "I reckon if we hadn't been so wore out we'd have heard them first shots that downed Peters, an' that was plum' careless of them if they was aimin' on rustlin'."

"They've riled us all right," the rancher growled, "but they wasn't rustlin' . . . an' that, like I said, don't make sense. Where's John?" he asked suddenly.

"I haven't seen him since we took off. Hey, John David!" Lee called into the dark.

There was no answer.

"Huh, mebbe he got stung," Lee concluded. "An' then again mebbe he took him a pasear. Reckon we got to wait till light to find out."

They came to the ranch house, an angry bunch of men. They had not escaped unscathed. Three of the cowboys had wounds, not serious but needful of attention, and the pain of them did not improve their tempers. Ormsby frowned at the absence of light in the house as he swung into the yard. He slipped from the saddle, handing the reins to Lee, and ran up the porch steps with the sense of something wrong—and the open front door did not abate it.

"Jean!" he called. "Hey, Jean, where are you?"

His voice echoed in the big room, the only response. The rancher got a light going and ran up the stairs to her room and found it empty. He came hurtling down and out to the porch.

"Lee," he yelled. "Come here!"

"Comin'!" came from the direction of the house corral and the cowboy came running over. Out in the dark, a rider came to a sudden stop, poised, listening. "Can't find Jean," and there was a world of worry in the rancher's voice.

And just then there was a shout from the kitchen where a light had been struck. A man came running up to them.

"Somebody's stuck a knife in the Chink," he announced.

"Go see if her hoss is in the corral, Lee," the rancher directed in a choking tone.

Nearby, the unseen, unnoticed rider disappeared.

ORMSBY returned to the house, searched the rest of the rooms, came back to the big room and refilled his revolver with fresh shells. His face was hard almost to the point of cruelty. His wife had died to give Jean birth. The girl had, through the years, in a measure taken her mother's place and on her own account had filled the lonely rancher's heart. Come harm to Jean and all hell couldn't hide the perpetrator from Fletcher Ormsby.

But now he was cold, collected, his mind clear and intent on only one purpose. He stepped to the porch as Lee came up.

"Her horse is there, Fletch," the cowboy said tersely. Other men were pressing up to the porch.

"Anyone rope one of them cayuses out on the basin?" Ormsby asked.

"Yep," was the simple answer. One of the riders led a saddled paint close, turned its flank into the light streaming from the open front door, and the rancher ground his teeth on a savage oath at sight of the Circle P brand.

"You fellers who got hit," he called out, "stay here. When it gets light an' you get fixed up, take a pasear through the cottonwoods an' back o' them hills. Rest of you get your irons an' climb aboard. An' bring that paint along."

Ormsby led his crew from the ranch house at a fast pace, with Lee Ford beside him.

"You seen John yet?" he asked once.

"Nary hide nor hair. Mebbe he was cut down out there an' we didn't know it," Lee added as an afterthought.

"The boys will find him then. Jean comes first," he said grimly and spoke no further word until they breasted the last rise and bore down on the home quarters of the Purdy spread.

The first light of day brought out the various objects but was not yet strong enough to expose the shabbiness of some

of the Purdy buildings which apparently had been neglected in favor of keeping up the main house.

Ormsby halted his men.

"Lee," he ordered, "get the fellers spread out behind me with their rifles ready and cocked. Don't want any shootin' unless I start it. Put a couple on the bunkhouse, both ends. Watch out for the windows."

Ormsby dismounted, took the paint's reins from Lee and advanced to the porch steps. Twenty yards behind him eight of the X Bar O punchers sat saddle tensely, rifles across their thighs, hands on barrel and trigger guard. A sleepy wrangler came from the barn with feed. Halfway to the corral he got his eyes open enough to espy the drawn-up line. He stopped, staring; then turned and walked straight away in the open toward some outlying sheds.

Fletch Ormsby wrapped his pistol butt hard on the porch flooring.

"Purdy!" he yelled. "Come outa there!"

THERE followed a half minute's tense pause. Then the door was flung open and Niles Purdy stepped out to the porch edge in shirt, pants and boots, but without pistol belt. His black hair was tousled, his features coarse and a fair replica of Jeff's except for the white scar of the younger man.

"Whatinhell you yowlin' 'bout, Ormsby, this time o' day?" he demanded angrily. Then he took notice of the empty-saddled paint. "What you doin' with my hoss?" His glance came back to Ormsby and he wasn't too sleepy to note a hard ruthlessness in the rancher's eyes he'd never suspected before.

"You answer my questions, Purdy," Ormsby ground out, "an' answer 'em straight or we'll blast you an' your damned outfit to hell. You got my gal here?"

Purdy's mouth dropped open in obvious, or well-disguised, surprise. Jeff came out to stand beside his father and Buck Ailer followed him, a somewhat dirty bandage binding the scalp wound

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which Sheriff Tim's big Peacemaker had made. Like the elder Purdy, neither man showed weapons.

"Your gal!" Purdy exclaimed. "Hell, no. What'd we be doin' with your gal here?"

"That's the first thing I came to find out."

Purdy looked beyond the rancher to the line of waiting men, not missing their eager alertness. He stiffened involuntarily, then his natural bravado asserted itself.

"What the hell you mean gangin' up on me like this?" Purdy demanded.

"Lee," Ormsby called without turning his head. "You an' Dal come up here." He handed over the reins to Lee. "Keep these critters here till I have me a look." He strode up the steps and across the porch.

"You keep the hell outa my house!" Purdy yelled at him, but without reply Ormsby entered.

In a very few minutes he was back again, his face a thundercloud. Young Jeff leered at him.

"If you've lost your gal," Jeff said, "how about that young Injun she took a likin' to, I don't see him among your rannies. Mebbe he run off with her."

The rancher's hard fist knocked Jeff clear over the porch rail to land in the dirt below. The elder Purdy, with an oath, sprang forward but stopped suddenly with Ormsby's pistol barrel shoved hard into his stomach. Buck Ailer hadn't moved but his eyes were devilish and crafty. Ormsby stepped back a pace.

"Aw right, she ain't in the house, Purdy, but we'll look the rest of it over in a minute." Ormsby gestured toward the paint horse with his six-gun. "That hoss o' yourn, Purdy, was carryin' one o' your men before we knocked him to Kingdom Come. He an' mebbe a half dozen killed Lem Peters an' were chousin' our cattle before we blasted 'em. You know any reason why we shouldn't blast you all to hell?"


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## CHAPTER IV

### *Indian Custom*

PURDY glanced quickly at Buck Ailer, then at young Jeff who was leaning against the porch, a hand to his bleeding jaw, his eyes hot and sullen. Purdy looked again at the waiting line, then back to Fletcher Ormsby and for the first time in his acquaintance he sized up the rancher's stamina correctly.

"Honest, Ormsby," he said in a tone strange to him, "I dunno what the hell you're talkin' about. I was aimin' to fire the cowpoke who rode that paint an' I reckon he knew it. Maybe he got one or two others to rustle your beef. That's something I dunno. An' we don't know a damned thing about your gal neither. Do we, Jeff?"

"Hell, no," Jeff growled. "Like I said, he better hunt up that Injun."

Jeff flinched and raised both arms high, as the Colt's barrel swung on him. Then Ormsby turned back to the older man.

"I believe you're lyin' in your teeth, Purdy, an' I aim to prove it when Sheriff Fowler takes over. Dal," he directed the second puncher, "you hold this paint horse an' keep your gun on these two critters. Come on, Purdy. Turn out your crew an' we'll have a look at 'em an' the rest of the quarters."

The two ranchmen, with Lee riding slowly behind them, were halfway to the bunkhouse when one of Ormsby's X Bar O men, who had gone to the rear of the long, low building, called out sharply. There followed a pistol shot, and then a rifle's blast. Three broke away from the waiting line, raced over and poured rifle shots into the bunkhouse windows. Men yelled from inside. The door was flung open and pistols and belts came sailing out. Purdy was beside himself with excitement.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he yelled, then ordered his men to come out. They obeyed briskly. The last to emerge was white-faced and had a stained and bloody bandage bound clumsily on one shoulder. Ormsby looked at him, then called two of his riders over.

"You two take this wounded galoot an' the paint," Ormsby directed, "an' beat it in to the sheriff. You tell him the whole mess. If he don't come out, most likely I'll see him sometime today."

"You can't do this to me!" Purdy expostulated, but Ormsby paid him no heed. The big rancher, with Lee, searched the bunkhouse and every building large or small that might hold Jean hidden.

Finally, heavy-hearted, Ormsby turned away and led his men back toward home quarters.

Near the cottonwood grove he turned to Lee, who was riding silently and gloomily beside him.

"That John, Lee. You trust him, huh?"

"I sure do, Fletch."

Ormsby said no more. Lee, however, in spite of the denial, had been struggling with doubts and questions of the same nature. It could not be altogether strange if, reared and brought up entirely among the Indians, the young fellow might not have ingrained in him the same primitive instincts and customs and, knowing no better, might consider them the universal law. To want was to take, and who wouldn't want Jean Ormsby? Lee recalled poignantly the long look that had passed between the two at their very first meeting.

At the edge of the cottonwoods Lee paused and gazed over the broad basin.

"Reckon you told the boys, Fletch," he said noncommitally, "to rake over back o' them hills. Mebbe I ought to take coupla the fellers an' take a look yonder." He waved an arm vaguely toward the low hills covered with growth that fringed the western and northern sides of the basin but didn't mention that he had specifically in mind the trail John had followed there, with his failure to explain what he had discovered after his prolonged absence.

"Can't do no harm I reckon," Ormsby answered heavily, and Lee, signing to two of the riders, struck off across the plain.

MEANWHILE, the Indian-reared youth, as soon as his quick intelligence had grasped the fact of Jean's disapparance, rode silently to the edge of the grove sheltering the home ranch. There he dismounted and, lighting a series of matches with which Lee had supplied him, bent low, holding the cupped flame close to the ground.

In a very few moments John found what he sought, the unshod hoofprints of running horses. He followed the marks until certainty of their direction confirmed what he had already conjectured and of which he had refrained from telling Lee more than that two Indians were of the gang which had choused the first bunch of cattle.

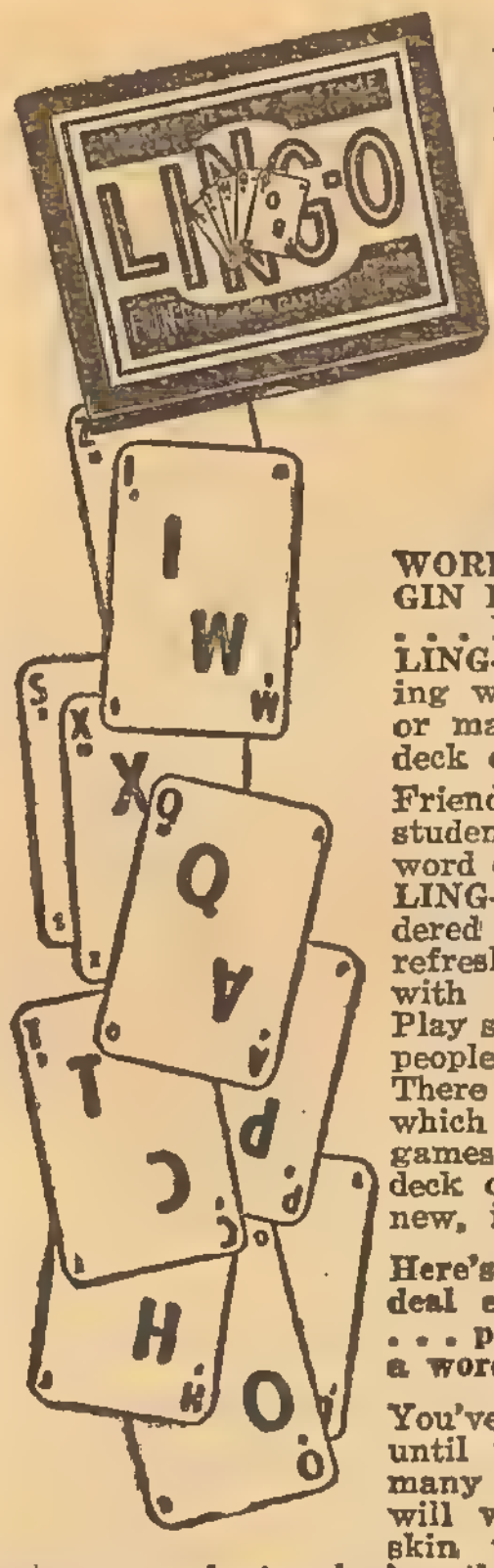
The mettlesome bay had rested since their coming from town but John had cut him out for the night foray and, once astride, pushed him unerringly toward the point where he had followed trail the preceding afternoon.

Once, in mid-basin, he glanced over his shoulder at the brilliant star in the East and his lips moved silently, then gave all his thought to the task that lay ahead. With tireless gait they rode the darkness down, and the first rays of light showed him, at the basin's fringe, that he had made no mistake. In place of the trail of two ponies, now that of four or five running horses was plainly marked.

In the growing daylight he swept across swale and traversed gap and defile on the twisting, rising and falling path that led to the great piedmont plain whose eastern extent he had surveyed with Lee. At about the same time Fletcher Ormsby and his men were turning disconsolately away from the Circle P, John's keen gaze picked out a small band of horsemen well ahead of him.

He pressed on and before long could count their number, ten, and still another figure that rode dejectedly with low-bowed head and hands fastened behind and ankles tied under the mount's belly. John's lips set grimly.

They heard his coming. Heads turned, then horses were wheeled and the ten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spread out a little, waiting. No weapons were drawn against the single rider, but John saw several rifle butts and sheath knives at girdle. He raised his empty hand, palm forward, in the universal plains' sign of wish to palaver, then slowed the bay to a walk as he drew close, and stopped.

Jean, distraught with all hope gone, was aroused from her apathy by the sudden halt. She saw John, with a wild beating of her heart. She wanted to call to him, to beg him kill her before he fell as he must with these ten wild outlaws against him; but he didn't even glance in her direction.

She saw him calmly scan their faces, then address himself to the eldest of the Indian clan who she had already sensed was its leader. Two of the younger men, who had been of her four captors, answered with short, angry words. John spoke calmly, seriously on, in a tongue that was strange to her but obviously well understood by the ten. She saw him raise his arm in a wide sweep to the north and east as he spoke and wisely guessed he referred to the soldiers who, she knew, were escorting the tribes to the reservation. He gestured behind him, the way he had come, and there was the promise of swift vengeance in his look and tone.

JEAN ORMSBY glanced at the leader and saw his hesitation that overrode the angry protests of the younger braves. The leader asked some question, and John held out his hand with the palm cupped. The leader nodded and came close to John, who filled the palm with gold dust from his pouch.

The younger men were still muttering, but John pushed the bay beside Jean's mount, slashed her bonds with his belt knife and swept her astride the sturdy horse before him. Then, raising one arm in salute, he turned the bay away and pressed it to a canter.

Out of earshot, Jean murmured once: "Thank God, and you, John." And he answered merely: "Morning Star." After that they were silent.

While still some distance from the first defile, John glanced backward and counted six Indian riders moving away at a diagonal from the course the rest were pursuing. A little later he observed them swinging in an arc toward their own trail and moving at greater speed. He urged the bay faster and Jean, noticing the quickened pace, looked back and her eyes widened in horror.

"They're after us, John," she breathed. He did not reply.

"Promise me, John," she pleaded. "If they catch us, kill me before they take me. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And you promise?"

"Yes. But be brave, Morning Star," and somehow she caught a little hope from his tone although her reason fought against it. She knew how far and fast the bay must have run to overtake her captors, and now the bay was beginning to strain under the double burden.

As they turned with the trail between the first hills, a glance back showed the Indians less than a half mile behind in full, savage pursuit.

"They'll catch us, John," Jean panted. "Can't we hide?"

"No good," he said, and forced the bay to run, but a little later its stride began to falter and foam from its mouth was thrown back to them.

They approached the narrowest of the defiles, whose banks were studded with piñon and undergrowth.

"Are you strong, Morning Star?" John asked.

"Yes of course. Why do you ask?"

"Go on fast. I talk to them."

"I won't leave you, after what you have done for me. I have your promise."

"Go on, Morning Star. Get help," he said calmly, as if the miles across the basin and the miles back would still find him alive.

He slowed the bay in the defile and slipped off with a hard slap on the rump of the animal whose impulsive leap set Jean back to better riding seat. And, accepting his judgment, perhaps thinking

he would hide, she urged the willing but tired horse to its utmost speed.

Just beyond the defile and approaching a second, she heard behind her the sharp crack of a pistol, a high-pitched scream, another revolver shot then, a few moments later, the louder crash of a rifle.

Jean half-turned her head, reluctant now to ride on. Her emotions had been stirred to their depths. From utter terror and despair, this strange youth had suddenly brought her into the sunlight of hope and now he was not hiding; he was giving his life that she might escape. Her heart leaped to him. Rather, she thought, she would go back and share his fate; then vision of the fate, from which she had once escaped but now would only offer herself again to it, left her in indecision.

The bay had kept its pace. She turned her head, numbly, to look ahead, and saw three of the X Bar O punchers streaming toward her.

Lee came close, his eyes darkening as he recognized the horse she rode.

"Where's that skunk?" he yelled.

"Quick, Lee," she screamed. They'll kill John! Oh, don't you understand! He took me from them!"

Lee made no answer, but he rammed the spurs into his horse's flanks, waved his two companions on and jerked the carbine from its boot. They passed a running, riderless horse. They saw a dead Indian in the trail; a second crawling desperately to cover. They caught a glimpse of John crouched low behind the meager shelter of a piñon, then poured their lead into four more braves grouped uncertainly farther back.

BACK at the ranch house Jean told her story to her father, but John David was not there. Lee left the others and found John at the corral, rubbing down the exhausted bay, soothing it with low words that Lee did not understand.

"Fletch wants to see you up to the house," Lee said.

John straightened and Lee almost recoiled from the wild light in the deep-gray eyes.

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"I have," John said, in his slow English, "more work."

"What?"

John stepped close. "You my friend. Perhaps you do not understand. They told me Scarface gave them money to take Morning Star."

Lee whistled, then clapped his hand hard on John's stalwart shoulder.

"I'm with you, John, all the way." Lee glanced over his shoulder toward the ranchhouse and saw no one on the porch. "Leave the bay," he said. "We'll take a coupla fresh ones."

"You understand? You go with me?"

"You never made a better bet," Lee said gruffly. He took a lariat from a post, entered the corral and flung the noose over a racing horse. "Put your hull on this one, John. I'll get me another."

Mounted, they took the trail that led southward toward Purdy's Circle P, without explanation one to the other.

They found the Purdy homestead deserted. No one answered their heavy knocking on the door and no one appeared about the premises.

"Reckon they-all 've gone to town," Lee concluded, and they swung again into saddle.

MEANTIME, Fletcher Ormsby, wanting to wind up this business once and for all, started for Slocum and he took Jean with him, vowing never again to leave her unguarded. They trailed two horsemen on the Orisco Trail who were too far ahead of them to be recognized. However, as they reached the first shacks of the town, Ormsby frowned at the two X Bar O cowponies tethered to one of the hitchrails; then, perceiving something out of the ordinary in the scene ahead of them, he pulled in his mount, with a restraining hand held out to Jean, and they proceeded at a walk down the dusty roadway.

Two men were walking along in the middle of the street, a pace apart. Beyond the two walking in the street, the road was clear for a considerable distance but on both sides many lined the walks. Then suddenly the crowd on the right swiftly dispersed, seeking shelter of doorway and alley and leaving two men standing braced and poised.

Jean, looking steadily at the backs of the two walking, uttered a faint cry.

"That's John," she said. "And Lee is with him. They act as if they were going to a fight."

"Yeah, an' there's Jeff Purdy and Buck Ailer up thar all set to cut down on 'em. Our two boys won't have a chance. Where in hell's Tim? I got to do something about this." He gathered his reins closer and loosened the big Colt six-gun at his belt. "You git over thar outa range, Jean."

"No! We've got to stop this. I can't have John killed after what he did!"

Both mounts started forward, but just then the two in the street stopped, facing the pair on the sidewalk at a distance of perhaps twenty yards.

And action followed so swiftly that Jean had only a blurred impression of flaming and crashing guns, the yells of excited onlookers and the scream of a wounded man.

John David was watching only the object of his vengeance and when his keen eyes saw the intention of Jeff Purdy and the first twitch of his muscles, he drew and shot all in one motion. Lee was watching the more dangerous of the pair, the gun-killer, Buck Ailer, and judging correctly that Ailer would send his first slug at the youth, Lee took his aim carefully and sent his bullet through Ailer's chest.

Both men were down; Ailer squirming, trying vainly to lift his gun, Jeff Purdy lifeless.

ORMSBY and Jean raced up, and Jean was off her horse in a flash as she saw blood trickling down from John's bare shoulder. He looked around at her and smiled, but already she had torn the scarf from her throat and was staunching the moderate wound.

"Morning Star," he said. "All is well now."

"John found out," Lee told them, "that

Jeff paid them renegade Injuns to run off with Jean."

A bystander heard that and spread the news and soon a crowd was moving down to the hoosegow where Sheriff Tim had locked up Niles Purdy, but Tim and his Peacemaker dissuaded them from their lynching purpose.

Jean turned from her father and the lawyer Enos Jackson, who were engaged in close conversation, and found John watching her. They had gone into the restaurant to get away from the crowd. She stepped over to John.

"I go now," John said simply. "I bring trouble to good friends."

Her eyes were hurt as she regarded him steadily.

"How can you say that, after what you have done? You have put an end to all our trouble. We will have peace now, thanks to you."

He seemed to be troubled and evidently was struggling to find the words to express himself. "My friend Lee," he said finally, "likes you much, Morning Star."

Jean looked at him, then a light broke over her face and shone in her eyes.

"Do you think," she said slowly, "that you have left behind you all the Indian habits?"

He gestured to the outside. "That is the last. I paid."

"Not one more?"

"Not one. Why do you ask that?"

"Because I thought it was a custom among the Indians that when a brave saves the life of a maid she belongs to him as his bride."

Slow comprehension came over him and warmth grew in his eyes. Then Enos Jackson bustled over.

"Look, John. I think I will have great news for you. I've had one telegram in answer to mine. By jingo, you may even be an English lord."

"I do not care," John told him. "I have . . . Morning Star."

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# Guns of Destiny

*(Continued from page 25)*

"Another four miles," Chaffee said. He straightened up on his knees and shaded his eyes with his right hand. Three horsemen were pounding down the river's edge on the Mexican side, coming toward them.

Zack Hogan snatched at his rifle and shouted to the wagon ahead. Then he pointed with his hand.

"Man in the lead is Buckmaster," Chaffee said suddenly. "Something's happened."

He watched George Buckmaster plunge out into the war when he was abreast of their wagon. The water came to the belly of his mount. Buckmaster was waving frantically.

"That's the girl an' her brother with him," Zack Hogan said. "I'm thinkin' Garrison took a look at Buckmaster's wagons when they came up."

Buckmaster came up with them and rode alongside. His face was tense.

"One o' your wagons went over, Chaffee," he called, "goin' down a grade. Spilled the loan an' Garrison got a look at the stuff. Before I could come up he'd looked under two or three other wagons. Then he grabbed a fast horse an' headed south."

"That means he'll be along any minute," Zack Hogan mumbled, "with a hundred o' them peon soldiers. Garcia will be smart enough to follow big George's trail."

Julia and Jud Henderson approached, and Bart Chaffee leaned over to help the girl up to the top of the wagon. Jud Henderson was very pale.

"I just received word from a rider out from Santa Fe that my government is sending a troop north to intercept the wagons. They won't be here for another week."

"Might as well be a year." Hogan scowled. "We can't even stop these things, Henderson, until we hit Logan Island."

"Hogan," Chaffee said suddenly, "ride down the line on Buckmaster's horse. Have the lead wagon stop and make the others anchor all around him."

"Anchor?" Hogan roared. "This ain't a ship we're sailin', Chaffee!"

"Tell them to toss one of the rifle cases overboard with the tow rope attached to it. The case will sink and there's not enough current to drag the wagons."

Hogan started to grin. He clambered over the side, slid onto Buckmaster's horse and plunged to the bank. Chaffee watched him race down to the next wagon and pass the word, and then on to the others.

FAR DOWN THE river, ten minutes later, they watched the lead wagon slow up as the heavy case splashed into the shallow water, the tow rope tightening. The second wagon dropped the substitute anchor within a few yards of the first vehicle and stopped completely.

Bart Chaffee could hear Hogan's triumphant yell in the distance. The third and fourth wagons anchored nearby, and then the fifth bumped into the fourth and held.

"You're going to fight them," Jud Henderson said quietly.

Chaffee nodded. He cut off the Osenaburg sheet and got his own anchor ready, Buckmaster assisting.

"The river is as good a place as any to hold them off," he stated. "They'll have to come through the water to get at us, and they can't come very fast that way."

"We'll give 'em as good as they ask for," George Buckmaster grinned. "How many are there, Chaffee?"

"At least a hundred," Chaffee told him. "We'll have twenty-six."

"Hell," the giant said, chuckling, "that's good odds, Chaffee."

They drifted past the eighth wagon, caromed off the eleventh, and then came to anchor next to the fourth, the anchor

dragging a dozen yards before holding.

Chaffee stood up and stared toward the south. The twelve wagons were huddled out in the center of the river within a space approximately fifty yards in diameter. Very clearly Bart Chaffee could see the ball of dust moving on the southern horizon.

Another half hour and a column of horsemen raced down along the bank, pulling up along the shore a quarter of a mile away. A rider detached himself from the group and splashed out into the water.

"They want to talk first," Zack Hogan grinned. "Looks like Garrison himself comin' out."

Floyd Garrison rode his white horse up to within twenty yards of Chaffee's wagon and then stopped.

"Chaffee!" he called sharply.

Bart Chaffee lifted his head. The other men were lying flat on the wagon tops, presenting very poor targets to the men on shore, holding their rifles in readiness.

"You're walking into a lot of trouble, Chaffee," Garrison said smoothly. "Stealing a man's cargo is a serious thing."

"I'll take the risk," Chaffee advised him.

"You're a bad man with your fists," Floyd Garrison said, "but this is not to be with fists, Chaffee. You'll either turn these wagons over to us or not a one of you will reach the States alive."

"Reckon we'll stay here," Chaffee said.

"Send the girl ashore," Garrison snapped. "We don't want to kill her with a stray bullet."

Chaffee glanced at Julia Henderson, crouching a few feet away. She shook her head firmly.

"If she goes," Jud said, scowling, "he'll hold her as a hostage. He's clever."

"Ride away," Chaffee called to the big man.

GARRISON turned his horse and went back to the shore. They saw him talking for a while with Colonel Garcia, and then the hundred men dismounted. Bart Chaffee studied them from the top of the wagon.


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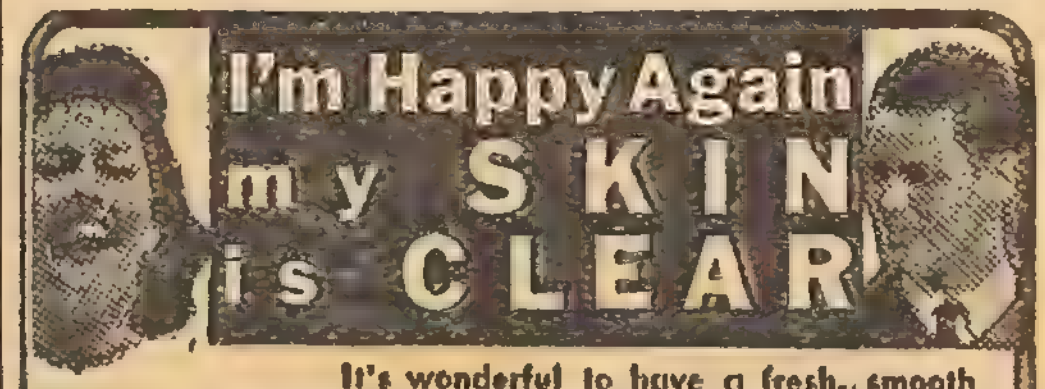


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"They've makin' camp," Zack Hogan muttered. "They ain't comin' out here, Chaffee."

Chaffee nodded. He realized now he should have known Garrison was too smart a man to risk a frontal attack even against twenty-six men when he had to come through a quarter of a mile of water to reach them.

"They'll lay siege," Jud Henderson said slowly, "and try to starve us out."

"We got plenty o' supplies in the wagons," Buckmaster growled. "We'll make 'em wait."

Chaffee didn't say anything. If they'd been on an island a siege would be feasible, but anchored out on the water with no chance of building fires, bearing the heat of the sun the entire day, was another matter.

"There's not much chance of the Texas troop locating us here," Henderson observed, "even if we did hold out a week."

"What do you have in mind, Chaffee?" Hogan asked curiously.

"We'll attack tonight," Chaffee said calmly.

"Attack!" Buckmaster grinned. "Shades o' San Jacinto!"

"They'll have their guards posted along the water's edge," Chaffee said. "We'll float down the river, walk ashore, and hit them from the rear."

Jud Henderson was nodding vigorously. "It's our only chance," he said. "Garcia's troops are not of the best caliber. They might break in a night attack."

"Pass the word around, Zack," Chaffee ordered. "Tell the men to get a few hours' sleep now before the sun goes down." He stretched out on top of the canvas himself and then noticed that Julia Henderson was watching, smiling a little.

"You're always happiest when action is imminent," she said. "You live on it."

Bart Chaffee shrugged. "It's something to live for," he stated, "something sure." He was implying that other things were not sure, that there was always the possibility of bitter disappointment. One was never disappointed in action; he got it whether he came out on top or not.

"There are other sure thngs in life," Julia told him, "if you'll seek for them."

"A man looks once," Chaffee said, "and that is all."

She had no answer to that and he went to sleep after awhile, not sure whether he'd hurt her, and telling himself he'd been unfair with this woman.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Gun Gamble*

A SLIVER OF MOON showed downriver, lighting up the twelve anchored Conestogas, gleaming on the bleached white of the Osnaburg sheets. With the setting of the sun a breeze came up, tugging at the wagons, rocking them gently as they strained at the anchors.

Along the shoreline Chaffee could see a half dozen campfires, and he could hear voices.

"There ain't enough light that they can see us I reckon," Zack Hogan said quietly. "When do we start, Chaffee?"

"Another hour," Chaffee said. "Move around around and pass the word. Have Tom Gray rig up a raft on which we can carry the guns. We'll have to lay low in the water."

Hogan disappeared, and Chaffee could hear him wading among the wagons. The Irishman came back in a half hour.

"Gray is fixin' up somethin' out o' wagon seats," he explained. "It'll carry all the guns above water."

Chaffee stood up on the load and stretched himself. Buckmaster was still snoring over at one end, and Chaffee pushed him gently with the toe of his boot. The giant sat up quickly.

"Break open one of the cases," Chaffee told him. "We want every man to have a rifle along with his small gun."

They were ready to go in another half hour. Chaffee, striped to the waist, lowered himself into the water. He placed his rifle and Dragoon Colt on the raft, which Gray, the carpenter, had tied together with ropes.

Men were slipping down from the wagon tops, one by one, and moving to-

ward the raft, hidden from shore by two Conestogas. Julia Henderson sat on top of her wagon, watching them gravely.

Looking toward the shore, Chaffee saw figures moving in front of the fires. He stared at the silent group in front of him. Every man was stripped to the waist and he'd placed his boots, guns and knife on the raft.

"One at a time," Chaffee ordered. "If you can float on your back, do that. If not, keep your head down very low, and face away from the shore."

Grasping the line on the raft, he started to tow the thing out into the clear. When he felt the current take it, he slid forward on his stomach, grasping the edge of the raft with both hands, and let the river do the rest.

Buckmaster followed him, twenty yards behind, and then Zack Hogan floated away from the stranded wagons. Glancing back once, Chaffee could see the line of floating men, very low in the water, indiscernible from the shore.

It took more than half an hour to reach the next bend in the river, and Chaffee was chilled to the bone as he dragged the raft toward the shore. Buckmaster came to help him push it up on the sand, and then both men ran up and down for a few minutes, warming the blood.

Zack Hogan stood fifty yards from shore, whistling softly as each man came down, guiding them in toward the landing place.

"Move around," Chaffee said, "till that chill wears off." He strapped on his gun and picked up one of the rifles.

"Reckon we can go any time now," Hogan said tersely. "I'm thinkin' o' those nice campfires upriver."

Chaffee divided the squad into three groups with Buckmaster, Hogan and himself in charge. Buckmaster was to get on the north flank of the camp, Chaffee planned to charge from the center, and Hogan from the south wing.

THEY MOVED OFF through the fringe of cottonwood along the bank, and then made a wide circuit of the Mexican camp. Chaffee could see

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firelights as they came up closer. Colonel Garcia had pitched his camp in a clump of willow a dozen yards from the water's edge.

George Buckmaster touched Chaffee's arm, and then moved away with his eight men. Zack Hogan drifted off with seven; and Chaffee, with the remainder of the crew, headed straight for the fires. They were to wait for the first shot from Chaffee before making the charge.

Carefully, Chaffee crawled closer to the camp. He could still see the figures moving in front of the fires, and there was something a little too methodical about this maneuver. Pausing once, he frowned and shook his head.

"Don't them hombre ever sit down?" Lee O'Hara, a teamster, growled.

Chaffee suddenly stood up and started to walk rapidly toward the camp, the crew following him in bewilderment. Twenty-five yards from the nearest fire, Chaffee discovered the ruse. The Mexican camp was deserted except for about eight peons who were patrolling in front of each fire, walking back and forth methodically, stupidly.

"Where in hell are they?" O'Hara muttered.

Chaffee stared beyond the campfire out into the water and saw a movement. He lifted his gun and cocked the hammer, cursing himself because he hadn't sent a man in toward shore to ascertain Garrison's movements before leaving the wagons himself. The tricky Garrison had left these peons on the bank, moving in front of the fires, to give the impression that the camp was tenanted, and at the same time more than ninety men were swimming out toward the wagons for a night attack!

"Head for the water," Chaffee ordered. "They're out there, going for the wagons." He squeezed the trigger and then started to run toward the camp.

The peons near the fires spun around, astonished, and then opened fire on the men breaking through the brush. Chaffee hit one of them with his first shot, knocking him to his knees; he struck another with the barrel of his Dragoon as he rushed by.

From the other flank he heard Buckmaster's roar, and then the big man hammered down the shore line, bewildered at finding an empty camp.

"In the water!" Chaffee shouted. He could see figures out there now, beginning to splash as they realized they were discovered.

Zack Hogan came up with his seven and dropped down on the sand beside Chaffee.

The peon guards had been shot or were running away. The men out in the water, bewildered at this attack from the rear, were yelling excitedly. Chaffee's teamsters dropped flat on their stomachs and began to fire at the shadowy figures offshore. Chaffee could hear the screams and the splashing as man after man was hit.

"It was damned clever." Hogan grinned. "But we're getting 'em anyway, Chaffee!"

CHAFFEE heard Colonel Garcia's deep-pitched roar as he issued orders in Spanish. The soldiers had no cover out in the river, and when they tried to go under water to avoid American bullets, their guns became wet and useless.

A group of them with Garcia in command attempted a charge up the bank, coming through two feet of water. As they splashed ashore, shooting wildly, a dozen of them were hit and went down. Garcia himself was one of the few to reach the sand, and here he tried to rally others staggering blindly up on the bank.

Big George Buckmaster rushed the Mexican commander with an empty rifle, swinging it like a club. Garcia fired a shot with his pistol, and Chaffee saw Buckmaster flinch, but the big man still came on. The rifle moved in a wide arc, Buckmaster holding it by the barrel. The heavy butt smashed Garcia's head as if it had been an eggshell. He went down without a sound, and the men around him broke for cover.

Chaffee spotted a man walking down-

river in the water, keeping low. He fired and missed his shot. Then, rising to his feet, he ran down the shore line to intercept this figure as he came through the water.

The man was coming up just beyond the last campfire, and Chaffee caught a glimpse of his face in the light. It was Floyd Garrison.

Garrison saw him and Garrison's gun cracked, Chaffee taking the slug through his left forearm. Chaffee kept running forward, firing at Garrison, and then the toe of his boot caught in a root and he pitched forward on his face. A slug from Garrison's gun grazed his forehead as he went down, and he saw the big man coming toward him, face glowing in the firelight, hatred in his eyes.

Carefully, Chaffee steadied the gun on Garrison's broad chest and squeezed the trigger. Floyd Garrison's mouth opened suddenly and his arms spread out. There was an expression of surprise on his face, the incredulity of a man who had always considered himself immune to death.

Garrison stumbled to his knees, firing one more shot which went over Chaffee's head. Then Garrison leaned forward in an attitude of prayer just before falling on his face.

The Mexicans out in the water were heading downstream or upstream in an endeavor to break away from the American guns.

"That's all!" Chaffee called sharply. He saw Buckmaster sitting on the ground near the dead Manuel Garcia. Buckmaster was holding his side, and there was blood on his fingers.

Zack Hogan came up, a scratch on his left cheek from a Mexican bullet.

"How's it, George?" Chaffee asked the giant.

"Not too bad," Buckmaster told him, "or I wouldn't be sittin' here." He looked at Chaffee's limp left arm. "You got pinked, too, my friend."

CHAFFEE called to Jud Henderson, who was smiling happily. "Catch up a horse and bring your sister ashore."

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# It doesn't make sense, folks

**A man's a fool** to go around with his pants pocket burning with extra folding money when he ought to buy an extra Bond, because that loose lettuce is the stuff inflation is made of. When that extra dough goes hunting for civilian goods (that are as hard to find as Crosby in a tuxedo!), it tends to push up prices. Besides, it doesn't make sense when twelve million kids are fighting our battle for any of us to hike up the cost of living by buying anything we can live without.

**ONE PERSON CAN START IT!**

**You give inflation a boost . . .**

—when you buy anything you can do without

—when you buy above ceiling or without giving up stamps (Black Market!)

—when you ask more money for your services or the goods you sell.

**SAVE YOUR MONEY.** Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to pay for the war and protect your own future. Keep up your insurance.

HELP US KEEP PRICES DOWN

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America

Then Chaffee sat down, his back against a tree, still holding the empty Colt in his right ahnd. There had been one slug in the cylinders!

"Send a man after the cattle," he told Hogan. "We'll get the wagons out of the water tomorrow and start them rolling for Texas."

"I reckon the boys can use the guns," Buckmaster said, grinning, "a lot better than them New Mexicans."

Chaffee nodded. With Colonel Garcia dead, and the New Mexican army poorly armed, there would be no northern attack against the Texas Republic—and without that support the Mexican Government would think seriously before attempting an invasion from the south where they would have to bear the full brunt of Texas power.

Jud Henderson came ashore with his sister, and Chaffee saw the concern on her face as she ran toward him.

"I . . . I was afraid," she said softly.

Bart Chaffee stared at her, seeing something in this woman which Elsa Mason had never possessed.

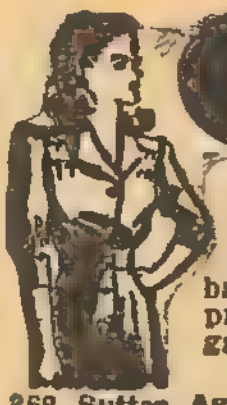
"It's been a long time," he said, "since a woman worried about me."

"You want it that way," Julia Henderson told him.

"No," Chaffee said, "I don't."

She was smiling as she examined his arm. "I shall remember it, Mr. Chaffee," she said.

There was a small promise here, but it was enough for Bart Chaffee. He could not see her face as she bent down, but he'd caught a glimpse of her eyes when she made the statement. It was enough.

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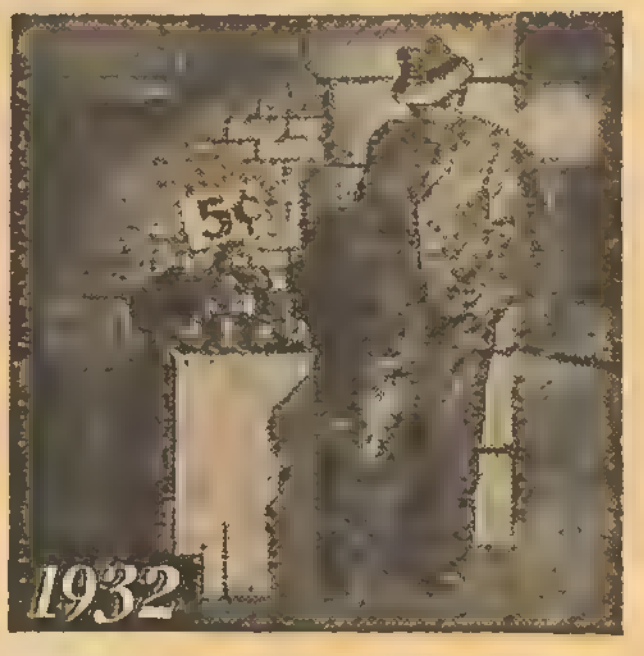
EXETER HOUSE, Dept. 45-H, 37 East 19th St., New York 3, N. Y.

# THE DOUGH YOU BLOW —will bring U.S. woe!

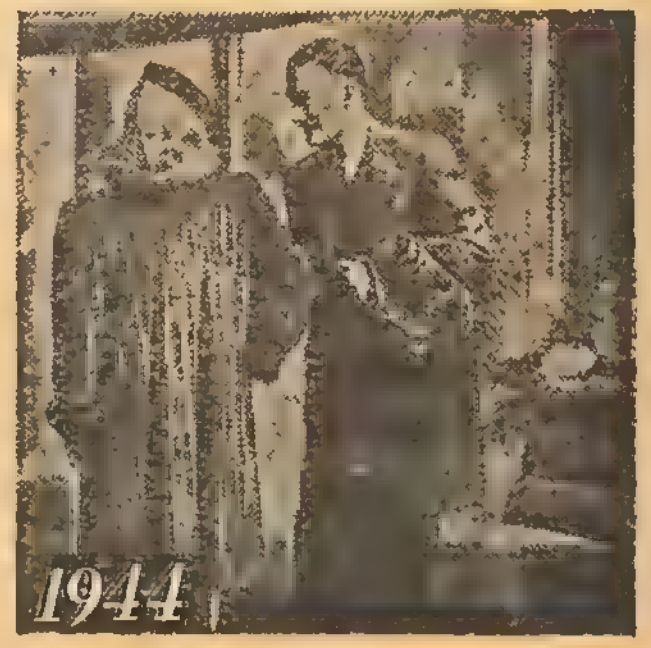
**What a boom** we were handed by World War No. 1! Money came easily—went easily. Everybody was splurging on everything. Prices went skying. Sugar eventually hit 28¢ a pound!

**Bye-bye, boom.** Factories closed; men laid off. Prices and wages sinking fast. With jobs scarce, some of that dough we'd blown would have come in mighty handy then.

**Prosperity.** Stocks up fifty points in a week. Again everybody was buying everything—regardless of cost. Depression? Phooey . . . We thought we'd found a way to *lick* depressions.




**Or had we?** Bread lines, apple venders. WPA. Prices dropping. Wages dropping. Everything dropping—except the mortgage. "What goes up must come down." Depression follows a rise.




**We're splurging again.** Americans have been earning more. But even today there are fewer goods to spend it on—so naturally prices rise. DON'T LET *IT* ALL HAPPEN AGAIN!

## 4 THINGS TO DO to keep prices down and help avoid another depression

1. Buy only what you really need.
2. When you buy, pay no more than the ceiling prices. Pay your ration points in full.
3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask for more—for your labor, your services, or the goods you sell.
4. *Save.* Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to help pay for the war and insure your future. Keep up your insurance.

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

# Ornery Cuss

*(Continued from page 37)*

beard growed out some. Pap'll whup the tar outta me if I show up all slick an' duded up."

Julia's dark eyes smiled at Doc Sawyer.

"Seems as if Jeff Markle's bound to be a neighbor," she said. "Anyway, Ed an' me had been thinking of taking on an extra hand. Come to think on it, Jeff hasn't had a bite of breakfast."

Jeff was listening to the morning sounds that arise when the chores haven't been done on such a pocket ranch.

"Great goshen!" exclaimed Jeff. "I've gotta slop them pigs, an' turn out them cows, an' roust up some firewood. An' then—"

If Jeff was going to miss the carefree life of the shiftless, ornery Markles, with no cows to milk, no pigs to be fed, and where you let your hair and beard grow regardless, his regret didn't show any in his voice.

Maybe someday he could learn to think and talk and act more like Ed and Julia Latham, especially Julia.

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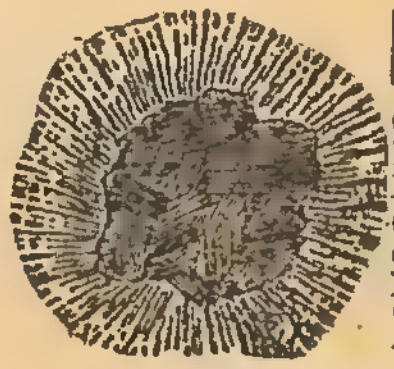

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**It's One of Your Vital War Jobs! It Will Bring Victory Closer!**

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# You Think the War is Over?

★ Just because a guy wears a gold "ruptured duck" in his buttonhole — that doesn't mean the war's all over for him. It isn't. Not until the last of his old buddies is off the field of battle . . . all of them who aren't staying there for good. . . .

★ It isn't over now, and it won't be over then.

★ That's why the American Veterans Committee was founded by a group of GI's and carried on by thousands of other GI's and veterans of this war. America is faced with serious problems, and the veteran has earned the right above all others to have his say about the post-war world that will be his and his children's.

★ Whether you're a veteran or still in the Service . . . whether the Service was or is Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, or Merchant Marine . . . whether you're a man or a woman—*you'll want to know all about the American Veterans Committee!*
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**554 Madison Avenue,**
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Gentlemen:

Please send me full details of the Intentions and Achievements of the American Veterans Committee.

I'm a Veteran..... Still in Service.....

My Name is.....

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# The One-horsepower Press

*(Continued from page 45)*

balance by the sudden jostling of the floor. Eben's first slug roared over the editor's head.

The short-barreled six-gun rocked in Lysander's hand, and the bantam banker spun half around. Shooting over the roaring press, Lysander drove three more savage slugs into Eben's sagging body. Gaspingly, Eben crumpled face-downward on the floor.

Snubber crashed in through the back door. The drum cylinder slowed to a stop.

"Land o' Goshen!" Snubber shouted. "You outdrew the fastest gun-slick in the country!"

Lysander looked down at the prone figure of Eben Thorp. "I did," he said dryly, "with the help of a horse."

Snubber glanced apprehensively toward the street.

"Think the shots were heard?"

Lysander shook his head dubiously. "Can't tell. The press was roaring pretty loud."

They carried Eben's body over near the desk, out of the yellow lamplight of the shop.

"Get the horse started," Lysander said tensely. "We've got to get the rest of the edition out."

By two o'clock the last of the night riders had taken copies of the *Herald*, smudging the freshly printed papers as he galloped away. Lysander sat down wearily at his desk. Toward morning, he dozed; his head lolled against the splintered back of his swivel chair.

HE WAS AWAKENED by shots that drummed through the morning stillness. Leaping to the window, he saw the army of homesteaders that stormed down Main Street. Sal, Eben's gaunt gunman, plunged around the corner of the bank. Then the gunman's wraithlike

body jerked convulsively as a blast of homesteaders' bullets brought him down.

The fight was quickly over. The homesteaders had won, freeing themselves from the grip of Eben's gunmen.

Lysander walked back to the press, a sudden emptiness flowing through him. Crumpled, ink-stained papers were strewn about the floor. Outside a fight had been waged and won and he had had a part in it . . . only. . . .

Lysander looked again at the flaming headlines of the paper. Outside, men had fought for their wives and children, for women like Mrs Jim Glover, for the right to build a home on the plains. He had fought—Lysander's mouth twisted crookedly at the thought—for everyone and for no one. That was a newspaperman's lot.

A gusty draft of wind propelled the crumpled papers along the floor and when Lysander turned, the girl who stood in the doorway read the paper she held with noiseless moving lips.

Lysander took a step forward. So she had finally seen their message and come. For how long had she known?

"I see you've finally learned to fight," Candy Lawler said quietly, and the paper she folded down carried the flaming message he had written to the homesteaders.

The steps she took then were quick ones, and there was a meaning in her eyes, as though she had waited hungrily for his words. The scar welts along Lysander's back felt good then, stretched tautly so his arms encircled her waist.

"No," he said, knowing now why he had fought. "Fighting *again*."

She raised her eyes questioningly, and Lysander smiled. There was no need now to tell her of what happened in Ohio after she had gone away. But it was good to keep her wondering. A mindful Ohio girl was apt to get a man into trouble unless she had things on her mind.

★


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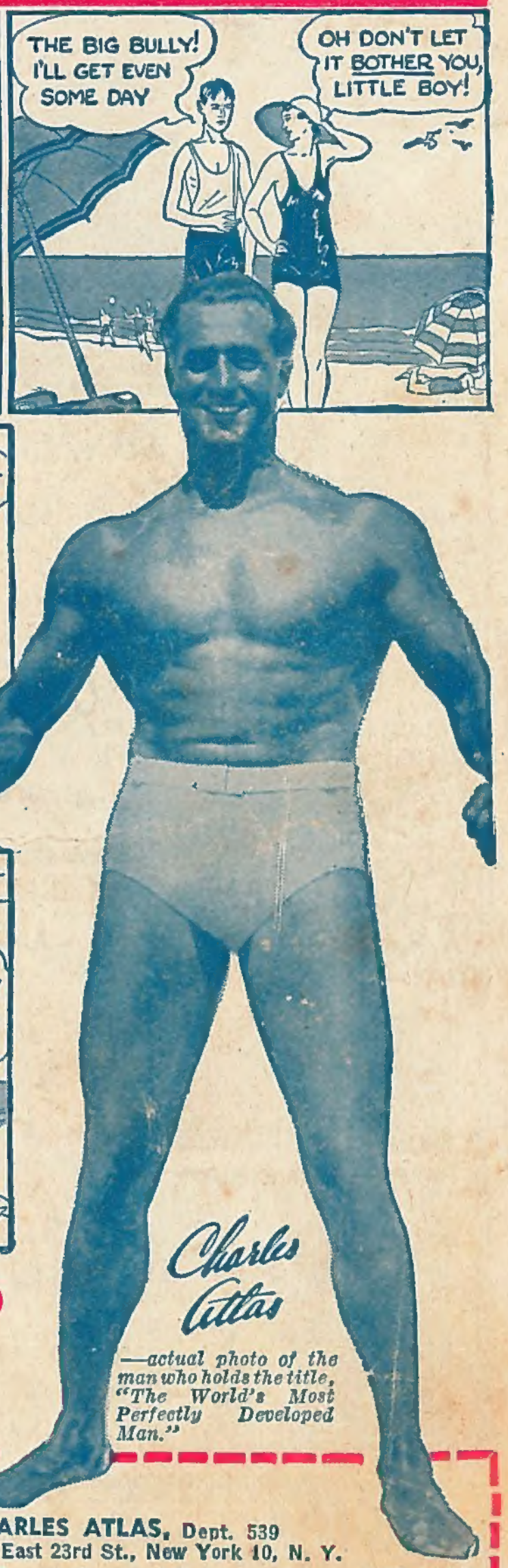
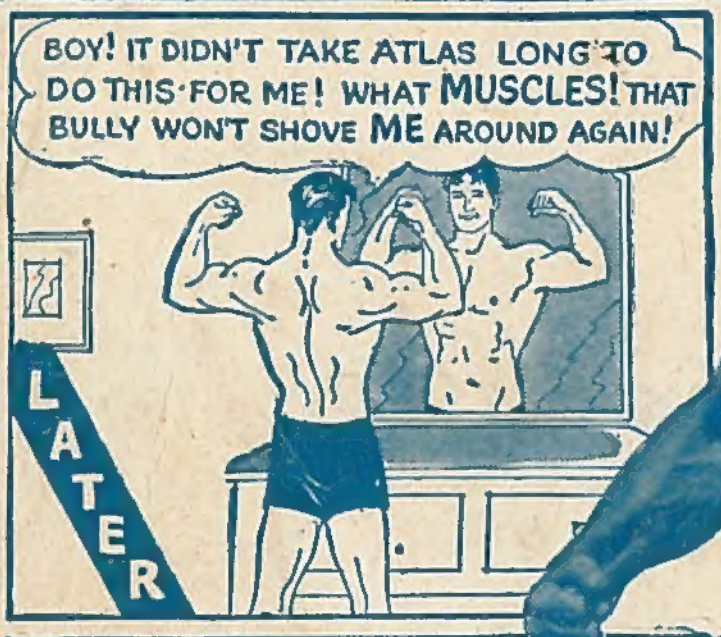
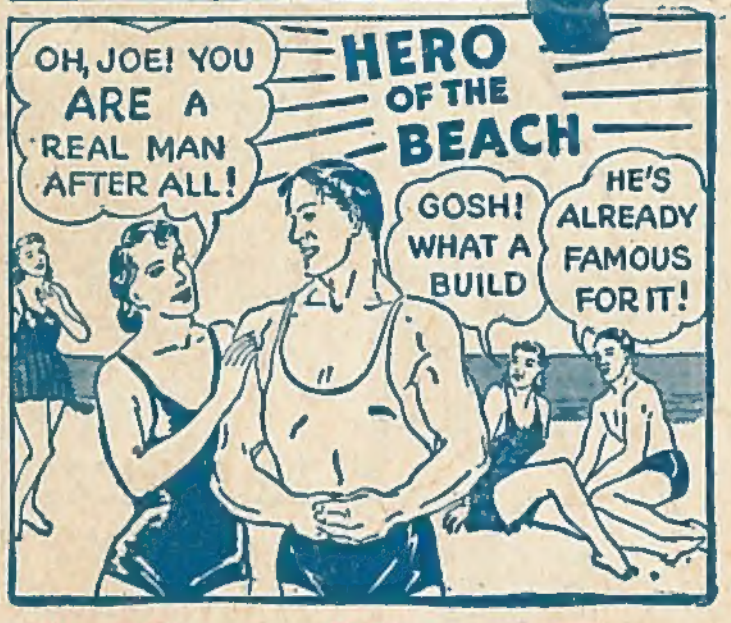
# HOW JOE'S BODY BROUGHT HIM FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME



DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!









*—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."*

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